

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### **Transition to work: A critical investigation into the views and experiences of a group of learners with learning difficulties in the Netherlands**

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*Transition to work; A critical investigation into the views  
and experiences of a group of learners with learning  
difficulties in the Netherlands.*

*by*

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**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of EdD**

**Department of Education**

**University of Roehampton**

**2015**



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## *Abstract.*

This research investigated the views of nineteen learners with learning difficulties in a special school in the Netherlands on their transition from school to work. Their views were explored in a setting represented by the views of five parents, six teachers, four employers and the way in which their position is described in school documents. The wider context is Dutch society, education and policies regarding special education and policies to enhance the participation of learners with disabilities into employment.

Main aim of the research was to give the learners a voice in the transition from school to work. The theoretical framework contains an interpretation of the concept of voice and its implications for listening to the learners. It is also discussed how different perspectives on disability influence education of the learners, how this affects their transition from school to work and ultimately their chances of employment.

The research has characteristics of both interpretive and critical educational research. Data collection took place in different ways. The learners were mainly interviewed in focus groups. This method was also used for the parents while teachers and employers were interviewed individually. Data from focus group and individual interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Conceptual analysis was used for analysis of the school documents.

The findings suggest that the learners have a sharp understanding of their position in the transition from school to work. They do not deny their learning difficulties but argue that impairments are part of human diversity and should not be a reason to make it more difficult for them to access employment. Findings related to the other participants suggest a discrepancy between views of the learners and views of others regarding their capabilities to participate in the transition process to employment.



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## *CHAPTER 1.*

### *Introduction.*

#### *1.1. Context.*

Dutch education has a long history with special education in which special schools were established systematically as early as 1920. About thirty years ago the Dutch government started to promote the integration of learners with special educational needs into the regular education system (de Beer 2012). In 1985, the Interimwet op het Speciaal Onderwijs (ISOVSO) [Special Education Interim Act] suggested that in the long term special education would disappear as a separate education provision. This resulted in the implementation of changes which started in 1990 with the Weer Samen Naar School (WSNS) [Going to School Together] legislation which was followed in 1998 by the establishment of Regionale Expertise Centra [Regional Expertise Centres] (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 1998). These expertise centres, in which different schools for special education co-operated, were supposed to support the process of reducing separate special education provisions. In reality the legislation achieved the opposite since the referral to some types of special schools increased (Schuman 2007, Minne et al. 2009). The Dutch education system distinguishes four clusters of special schools;

- Cluster 1 for learners with visual impairments.
- Cluster 2 for learners with hearing or communication impairments.
- Cluster 3 for learners with physical impairments, chronically ill learners, learners with learning disabilities and learners with multiple impairments.
- Cluster 4 for learners with severe developmental disorders and behavioural problems.

With the memorandum about Passend Onderwijs [Appropriate Education] (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2006) the Dutch government made another step in the reform of special education. The act became effective from the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2014. The implementation of Appropriate Education means that school boards have the responsibility to offer all learners the best possible placement in education. Schools are required to describe the support they can offer, with the aim to make extra support possibilities for learners with special needs transparent. Schools for regular primary and secondary education should cooperate with special schools in regional consortiums for primary and secondary education. At the same time special schools have to plan their education according to the Wet Kwaliteit (V)SO [Act on the Quality of (Secondary) Special Education] (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2010), which became effective from the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2013. Through this act the Dutch government intends to increase participation of young people with disabilities in society and ensure the quality of special education provisions (Zandbergen 2010, van Beekveld and Terpstra 2012). The act specifically mentions employment as an important aspect of successful participation. This can be seen as a positive development although Winn and Hay (2009) indicate that access to employment for people with disabilities is not unproblematic. Finding employment is difficult for learners with learning difficulties as their transition from school to work needs careful planning and involvement of all stakeholders; learners, parents, teachers and employers.

The research takes place in a situation where the researcher is a member of the school management and chairperson of the Individual Needs Committee of the school. This committee assesses development of learners and gives advice to teachers about teaching approaches of individual learners.

## *1.2. Rationale.*

There is considerable research about the processes which have the potential to increase successful transition of learners with learning disabilities to post-school

options. There is also knowledge about procedures which have the potential to enhance the chances of learners with learning disabilities of employment. This kind of research elicits important insights but often takes the perspective of parents and/or professionals as starting point of the inquiry. Goupil et al. (2002), for example, investigated parent and teacher perceptions of individual transition planning, Kaehne and Beyer (2009) focused on the views of professionals on aims and outcomes of transition of young people with learning disabilities while Carter et al. (2014) explored the perceptions of parents and teachers on transition assessment and planning for youth with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. There is far less research into the views of the learners themselves which means that their views have not received the attention they deserve, as is also indicated by Watson (2012).

The aim of this research is to contribute to the body of knowledge about the transition of learners with learning difficulties from school to work by investigating the views of the learners themselves. The research will investigate the views of nineteen learners of a Dutch school for Voortgezet Speciaal Onderwijs voor Zeer Moeilijk Lerenden [Secondary Special Education for Learners with Severe Learning Difficulties], on their transition from school to work. In an international context the term severe learning difficulties is infrequently used and sometimes has a different meaning than it has in the Dutch context. The choice has been made to employ the internationally used term of learners with learning disabilities and the term learners with learning difficulties in which the last concept is a translation of the Dutch words learners used to describe themselves.

The views of the learners will be explored in a setting of views of five parents, six teachers, three employers, a representative of an employer's organisation and the way the role of the learners is described in school documents. The word setting is used because it implies a certain connection and interrelationship. Maybin (2013) argues that views are formed in a dialogical process with their environment which means that



views of learners, teachers and parents and to a lesser extent employers cannot be detached from each other. Parents are often involved in the decisions which are taken in the transition phase and can provide unique insight into the strengths and needs of the learners (Carter et al. 2014). Teachers are regularly the main contributors to the planning of the transition process and have acquired knowledge about the learners over a period of time (Shogren and Plotner 2012). The views of the employers and a representative from an employer's organisation are included because they are a key-factor influencing the chances of employment for the learners. To increase readability throughout, the employers and the representative of the employer's organisation will be referred to as the employers. The school documents can provide information about how the role of the learners is defined in procedures which are used in the transition from school to work. The use of language in the documents can give an indication of how learners are perceived in relation to decision making processes. This is supported by Montesano Montessori et al. (2012), who point out that the use of language in social processes reflects and influences how people are perceived

The exploration of the views of the learners has the aim to contribute to the empowerment of learners with learning disabilities in their transition process and not to simply give an account of the views of these learners concerning employment which indicates that it is not value free (Scott and Usher 2011). The research could contribute to the assessment of the situation of learners with learning disabilities in the transition phase from school to work. Outcomes could help schools and teachers to reflect on their own organisation regarding transition, the involvement of learners in the planning of transition and on the cooperation between school and employers.

### *1.3. Research questions.*

The research will be guided by research questions in which the first and most central questions is:

- How do the participating learners with learning difficulties view their position in the transition phase from school to work?

With a sub-question:

- Which aspects related to work are considered important by the participating learners?

Fine (1994) and Scott and Usher (2011) suggest that any voice is embedded in the dominant discourse of a society which forms the context in which it is understood. In this research the voice of the learners is related to the setting provided by the views of parents, teachers and employers and the way their position is described in school documents. These are all located within the wider context of Dutch society, Dutch education and policies relating to learners with special educational needs. An aspect of the discourse related to education in the Netherlands is the categorisation of learners with special needs and a segregated education system.

The setting in which the learners express themselves is an important aspect of this research since the views of employers, parents and teachers might assist to understand barriers or opportunities experienced by the learners and will be investigated using the following research questions:

- What is the view of parents on the position of learners with learning difficulties in the transition from school to work?
- What is the view of teachers working in the transition phase from school to work on the position of learners with learning disabilities in the transition from school to work?
- What is the view of employers on employment of learners with learning disabilities considering competencies related to work?

With a sub question:

- Which factors in the transition process from school to work are considered important by employers?

The last research question is intended to provide insight into how the position of the learners is presented in school documents related to the transition from school to work.

- How is the position of learners with learning disabilities described in school documents about the procedures in the transition phase from school to work?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (United States Congress 2004), the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE] (2009) and the Styrian Association for Education and Economics [SAEE] (2010) all describe the importance of the participation of learners with learning disabilities in their own transition process which makes an understanding of the way the position of the learners is described in documents an important part of the setting. The way the role of the learners is defined in the documents will, to an extent, determine their influence on decisions about their future.

## *CHAPTER 2.*

### *Theoretical Framework.*

#### *2.1. Introduction.*

This chapter will discuss important theoretical issues related to this research. The first section will focus on the concept of giving learners a voice which is the starting point of this research. Lewis (2011) and Watson (2012) point out that, although some progress has been made, listening to the voice of learners with disabilities including learning difficulties still lacks behind. Giving learners a voice is an active process which requires more than listening to their views only. Scott and Usher (2011) dismiss research where voices are presented as “isolated and innocent moments of experience” (p.20). The voices of the learners in this research are their interpretation of their position in the transition from school to work. This means that their voice in itself needs interpretation. The different research questions are designed to guide this research and this interpretation by connecting the views of the learners with the views of parents, teachers, employers and to the way their role is described in school documents.

Fine (1994) argues that the concept of voice has the potential to obtain critical insights into the practice of education but it is important to be aware that voices are influenced by dominant views in society. In this research it is vital to develop an understanding of the different perspectives on disability which have potentially influenced the views of the learners, the views of their parents, teachers, the employers and also that of the researcher. Section 2.3. will discuss the development of understanding disability from an individual psycho-medical model, which was strongly challenged by Oliver (1996), towards a capability perspective on disability as developed by Terzi (2010). The way disability is understood has consequences for education. When disability is understood from an individual psycho-medical perspective it is more likely that education will make

use of categorisations of disabilities. A capability perspective on disability, however, presents more opportunities for inclusive practice (Reindal 2010) as will be discussed in section 2.4. The last sections will discuss aspects of the transition from school to work of learners with learning difficulties.

## *2.2. Listening to the views and voice of the learners.*

Ruddick and McIntyre (2007) argue that giving learners a voice by listening to their views is not as unproblematic as it sounds. They point out that people often assume they listen to learners, without recognising that listening to the voice of learners entails responsibilities.

The first aspect of taking responsibility when listening to the voice of learners with learning difficulties is to acknowledge that they have a right to express their views. This right applies to all children and young people with and without disabilities and is laid down by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (cited in Lewis and Porter 2004) which requires countries to;

assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12) (p.191).

Hymes (1996) (cited in Maybin 2013, p.383) suggests that learners not only should have the possibilities to have their voice heard but should also have the “freedom to develop a voice worth hearing” (1996, p.64). This is a complex process and depends on the learner’s access to conversations and interactions within institutions such as a school (Maybin 2013). The views of learners and teachers can provide information about how this process of developing a voice takes place in the school. The voice of learners develops in a dialogical process with their environment (Maybin). Their views and experiences are influenced by their personal circumstances, by views of their

friends, by views of their parents and teachers, by the way their education is organised and by the current socio-economic and political situation. The more learners are challenged, get opportunities to express their views and to listen to the views of others, the better they will develop their ability to speak for themselves. Exploration of the school documents can possibly assist to establish whether the school has policies to enhance and support learners in expressing their views.

When learners are invited to share their views this brings about the responsibility that they are listened to. Schostak and Schostak (2008) point out that a voice only exists when there are listeners. In this sense this research provides a listening. Again this is not unproblematic when it concerns learners with learning difficulties. People can truly believe that they are listening and even describe the efforts they made to elicit someone's views, but this person can still feel he/she has not been heard. This issue is particularly important in connection with this research where learners with learning difficulties are involved. People often describe learners with learning difficulties in terms of vulnerability, incapacity and deficit which influences the way they listen to these learners as is pointed out by Jingree and Finlay (2013). This contributes to a low status which influences the way other people listen to their views and also to the power these learners have regarding decision-making. Giving learners a voice in itself is not enough to empower them, it is necessary to critically examine the interpretations learners give of their own situation since their interpretation is influenced by the context created by society. Their views have developed in a dialogue with their environment but this environment is part of the segregated Dutch education system which means that their interactions with learners without learning difficulties were limited. The same can be said about parents and teachers, they too are possibly influenced by the discourse of the segregated education system.

Listening to the learners has a relationship with issues of power, which is also maintained by Cairns and Brennan (2005). When people are prepared to listen to what

the learners have to say, they have to accept that it might challenge their authority. Listening to the voice of learners requires that people are prepared to give up some of their power and hand it over to the learners. When the learners are in a situation, where they feel they have little control over their lives, they are more likely to think that their voices are not heard. Winter (2006) concludes that in such situations they are probably right about this. When learners are not routinely involved in decisions about their future, it can be assumed that even a framework which claims to put the learners first, uses meaningless rhetoric. The relationship between listening, participation in decisions and power goes far back and was already discussed by Arnstein (1969). She developed a model which assisted in visualising and discussing the level of participation of people in decision-making processes. These original thoughts about participation are still of great value and have led to different tools to visualise participation levels and ways of participation. Power relations are a determining factor and need to be analysed in any situation where participation is the subject of discussion, which is also suggested by Shier (2001) and Scott and Usher (2011). Participation is only achieved when a person, in this situation a learner with learning difficulties in the transition phase from school to work, has been given power but also has taken power in a decision process. Comparing the views of teachers and learners on participation in decision-making processes can give an indication whether teachers think they have given power to the learners but also whether learners feel that they acquired power to make their own decisions.

Listening to the views of learners involves the responsibility to really take these views into consideration. Lewis (2011) suggests that this requires a “listening culture” (p.89) which is not confined to the school but, for example, also includes their work-experience place or workplace. It also applies to educational practice in which a listening culture requires participation of learners in discussions about different school policies and more importantly, to decisions about the future of the learners. Listening to

the voice of learners requires an active attitude and recognition of the importance of their views (Ruddick and McIntyre 2007).

There is evidence that giving learners a voice can have an empowering effect on them (McLeod 2007). However, listening to learners or consulting them is not the same as giving them power in the decisions made about their own future (Hart 1992). This is an important distinction which determines whether there is participation or not. Participation in decision-making means that learners are supported in this process and that the power holders give up part of their power (Shier 2010). These power holders are often the professionals in the school. An indication for the power learners have in the transition phase from school to work can be found in the level of participation in decisions made about their future. The outcomes of this research might give an indication to what extent the professionals have given up some of their power.

In 2001 Shier developed a model of participation with five levels, based on the ladder of participation developed by Hart (1992) as an adaptation of Arnstein's original "Ladder of citizen participation"(1969). Shier left out the phases of non-participation and identifies five levels:

1. Learners are listened to.
2. Learners are supported in expressing their views.
3. Learner's views are taken into account.
4. Learners are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Learners share power and responsibility for decision making processes.

(Adapted from Shier 2001, p.110).

In the transition phase, the distinction between listening to learners and participation, which means that learners share power and responsibilities is particularly important (Beyer and Robinson 2009, European Agency for Development of Special Needs Education [EADSNE] 2009). Both sources emphasise that participation in decision making has an empowering effect on people with disabilities and enhances their



chances of successful transition. It means that their views are taken into consideration which makes it more likely that capabilities and employment are geared to one another. They also found that successful participation needs to be developed. Young people need to be taught how to participate, which makes the role of education in the transition from school to work crucial. It is suggested that schools for learners with learning difficulties need to be aware of the meaning of participation and develop their practice accordingly, in this sense it is a learning process for schools too. This can support schools in determining whether the role of learners in decision-making contributes to participation in employment and society. The awareness, of the meaning of participation, can only be achieved when teachers and schools critically consider and reflect on their role in the transition phase from school to work. It is part of this research to determine how the school and teachers reflect on their own role in this process. The way schools and teachers reflect on their role is related to the understanding of disability in society as will be discussed in the next sections.

### *2.3. Understanding Disability.*

This research aims to give learners a voice concerning their expectations and aspirations regarding employment. This is in contrast with much research done in the past in which views of children or learners with disabilities tended to be ignored (Watson 2012). Early research often focused on views of parents and professionals of learners with disabilities as mentioned in Chapter 1.2. The idea was that learners with disabilities were not capable of expressing their views and speaking for themselves. This coincided with the use of a psycho-medical model to determine disabilities which had and still has its influence on education. This research might contribute to a dialogue about these influences in schools by investigating and comparing the views of learners and teachers on the chances of employment of the learners followed by a critical discussion.

The individual psycho-medical model developed categories of disability based on the idea that disability can be defined objectively by using clinical scientific psychometric measures (Danforth 2008).

Disability, in this light, is synonymous with a bodily or mental anomaly demonstrated by significantly subnormal functioning in domains such as physical mobility and performance, sensory operations such as hearing or vision, general intelligence, psychological or linguistic processes of learning, and social or adaptive behaviour (p.46).

The individual psycho-medical model has been criticised because it denies factors in society which cause disability.

It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organisation (Oliver 1996, p.32).

Oliver criticised and rejected the medicalisation of disability and developed the social model of disability which placed the causes of disability in society. Disabilities are not located within the individual but they are produced by conditions in society, which disable some of its citizens. Impairment in itself does not lead to a disability; it is society that disables people by creating barriers for them, which prevent full participation. Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) give the following overview of the main critique about the individual psycho-medical model pointed out by Oliver and others;

It implies that "within-individual" factors are the primary or exclusive factors of disability.

It de-emphasizes the role of social factors in creating disabilities.

It creates a taxonomic system for categorizing disabilities, and an identification process that results in labelling people with disabilities.

It implies the treatment of people with disabilities by medical and paramedical professionals and creates powerful, vested interests in the medical industry for finding a “cure” for disability or preventing it.

It implies a cruel professional attitude towards people with disabilities, a paternalistic relationship between the professional and the clients with disabilities, and it invades people’s privacy.

It implies the medical treatment of disability which, in turn, is equated with stigma, unnecessary hospitalization, and asylums

(Adapted from Anastasiou and Kauffman, p.368).

The awareness raised by the social model has been important in the development of different views on disability and on the emancipation of people with disabilities but can be criticised for being too simplistic in its approach to the disability issue (Terzi 2004, Shakespeare 2006, Reindal 2008, Watson 2012).

Many learners with learning difficulties will experience barriers in society which prevent them from full participation. The views of the learners but also those of their parents, teachers and the employers can provide an insight into the barriers, which might exist in this particular situation. It is important to assess these barriers and try to remove them, but it is equally important to acknowledge the individual differences between people with disabilities. People who need to use a wheelchair because of a physical impairment will probably experience different barriers in comparison with people with a visual impairment, hearing impaired learners will probably have different experiences compared to learners with learning difficulties. The social model, as developed by Oliver and others, tends to discuss issues related to disability as if disabled people are

a homogenous group, which they are not. Shakespeare (2006), Emerson and Hatton (2007), Terzi (2010) and Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) all point out that the diversity of people with impairments leads to different variables contributing to the way they experience disability. Disability is a complex variable with multi-dimensional aspects which influence political, social and cultural experiences (Watson 2012). Learners with disabilities are not a homogenous group, their experiences differ and can be influenced by the choices they make. In other words, it depends on the freedom learners have to make choices about the life they want to lead, as pointed out by Reindal (2010). The adaptation of social models raised an awareness about disability, which has broken down the causal understanding between impairment and disability. However, it has not succeeded in finding the answer for the relationship between reduced function and disability since people with disabilities are still viewed and treated differently. Learners with learning difficulties will experience limitations in their activities as a consequence of their intellectual impairment which cannot solely be attributed to barriers in society (Terzi 2005b). According to Shakespeare (2006) disability cannot be limited to a health condition of an individual, it is never solely a result of oppression and it is also not a result of discourse only. Both Thomas (1999, 2004) and Reindal (2008) recognised this dilemma and tried to fill this gap in the social model of disability by modifying the model, adding the notion of “relational understanding of disability” (Thomas 1999) or as Reindal (2008) puts it, understanding disability using a social relational model. Thomas and Reindal both recognised that people with disabilities sometimes face “restrictions of activity as a consequence of their impairment” (Thomas 1999, p.43). However, these restrictions need to be seen as “impairment effects” (p.43) and do not constitute disability. This research can provide insight in whether and how the learners face restrictions of activities due to their learning difficulties as discussed by Thomas and Reindal. The data can possibly provide an understanding about how learners experience these effects of their impairments and how this influences their perception of disability.

Reindal (2008) uses the term reduced function instead of impairment but seems to agree with Thomas when she says;

...whether the reduced function and its effects become a disability is dependent on restrictions within various macro levels in society that are imposed on top of the social effect that the reduced function implies for that individual (Reindal 2008, p.144).

Watson (2012) warns against envisaging impairment and disablement as dual systems and not as a complex interdependent phenomenon. An impairment can cause limitations but these can never be an explanation for barriers created by society, discrimination or oppression of disabled people. To understand and evaluate this interdependency Terzi (2005a, 2005b, 2010) proposes an understanding of disability through the capability approach. This is a framework which takes human diversity and the interrelation between individual impairments and circumstantial factors as its starting point. The data of this research will be related to different perspectives on disability and can possibly assist to understand from which perspective the learners view their position in the transition from school to work. It is possible that they experience disability as a form of oppression which would connect with the views of Oliver. It is also a possibility that their views are more connected to social relational or capability perspectives of disability.

The capability approach asserts that a focus on capabilities forces us to look at what people can actually do, and what people can do is dependent on the heterogeneities within the areas which outline the diversity of humans' personal needs (Reindal 2010, Terzi 2010). The areas which outline the diversity of humans' personal needs are based on the ideas of Sen (1999). Sen points out that human diversity is prevalent in at least five areas; personal characteristics, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, diversity in relational perspectives and differences within the family. The first

area mentioned by Sen (1999) involves personal characteristics such as constitution, impairment, health, gender and age. The capability approach does not evaluate the causes of impairment or disability which are a prominent part in the debate about individual medical or social understandings of disability.

The central concern of the capability approach is evaluating how well people's lives are going with reference to their 'capabilities to function', that is, their real opportunities to be and do what they value being and doing (Terzi 2010, p.3).

The capability approach understands disability and impairment as part of human diversity.

...the capability approach provides a specific conception of disability as one aspect of human heterogeneity, without suggesting monolithic and direct notions of diversity as abnormality (Terzi 2005b, p.452).

The approach uses the concepts of functionings and capabilities in which functionings are the activities which people value doing such as walking, running, eating or reading but also being employed or doing volunteer work. Capabilities are the functionings or combinations of functionings a person can achieve, the opportunities people have to achieve the activities they value. In this research the learners value employment as something they want to realise in their lives. It could be argued that learners might be influenced by the discourse in society that employment is important but Vehmas (2010) maintains that "ultimately the individual herself defines her aims" (p.89). This means that the learners have the right to set their own aims. These aims need to be evaluated in relation to the personal and social circumstances, abilities and impairments of the learners. The learners who participate in this research all have learning difficulties. In the capability approach, a learning difficulty can be seen as a reduced function or impairment. Whether this impairment becomes a disability depends on the

circumstances and restrictions which are imposed on top of individual and social effects of that reduced function (Reindal 2008).

The way disability is understood has implications for the place of and role of people with disabilities. The discussion above indicates that there is a development in understanding disability from perspectives, which placed disability within the individual, towards models that recognise the complexity of disability. This does not mean that individual models have no effect anymore. In the Dutch context the individual psycho-medical model still has its influence on education as will be discussed below.

#### *2.4. Disability and Education.*

The way society organises education for learners with learning disabilities can be seen as an indication of the dominant views on disability in society as indicated by Barton and Landeman (1993). They point out that the way we organise schooling in society reflects the kind of society we desire. This is supported by Oliver (2000) who makes a connection between segregation in education, by creating special schools for children with disabilities, and segregation in society as a whole. The segregation created in education can be seen as a result of the understanding of disability created by the psycho-medical model. Oliver makes clear that the debate about participation of people with disabilities in society is a fundamental issue involving human rights and equal opportunities. This research aims to investigate whether the relationship between the segregated education provisions and segregation in society, as suggested by Oliver, also plays a role in the chances of employment of the learners.

Borsay (2011) made an historical analysis of the development of segregation in the education system and concludes that this system, with an emphasis on impairments, evolved from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This prevented disabled people from full citizenship and although legislation has changed “barriers to full educational rights of disabled children will be slow to break down” (p.18). This is confirmed by Vehmas (2010), who

observes that more learners are categorised as problematic in the sense that they are not considered to fit into regular education.

A continually growing number of individual characteristics are seen to be problematic in educational settings. Despite various efforts to avoid stigmatisation of people in special educational discourse, in practice increasingly more people are seen as problematic in the school organisation (p.87).

Education in the Netherlands demonstrates a comparable development since the referral of learners to schools for children with behavioural problems is still increasing, despite efforts to educate more children in regular schools (Schuman 2007). Over a period of time the answer has been a focus on the difficulties attributed to individual learners, or at least factors that are placed within the child, based on an individual or psycho-medical model of disability (Runswick-Cole and Hodge 2009). De Graaf (2010) argues that, in the Dutch segregated system, thoughts of learners, parents and teachers are probably influenced by the individual psycho-medical model.

The influence of the individual psycho-medical model still shows in the criteria which are used to define the different categories of disabilities which are used in the Dutch education system. At the time of writing, learners are considered to have severe learning difficulties when they have an IQ score below 55 points on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) IV or a comparable and approved test, or when they have a score between 55 and 70 in combination with a diagnosed disorder such as an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At the end of their school period, when they are between eighteen and twenty years old, their ability to work is assessed by the Commissie Indicatiestelling Zorg (CIZ) [Committee Statements Social Service] again based on individual impairment criteria.



Views on disability can determine whether learners with disabilities receive their education in a segregated setting, integrated in regular education or in an inclusive education setting. The Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 1994) has had far reaching influence on thinking about education for children with special needs. Dupoux et al. (2005) emphasise that the Salamanca Statement was an important step in an international development promoting integration of children with special needs in regular education. In the Salamanca Statement ninety countries, including the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and twenty educational organisations declare that, the best way for the integration of children with special needs in education and in society is inclusive schooling. The difficulty is that there seem to be many different interpretations of what is meant by integration and much confusion over what is meant by inclusion as is suggested by Lloyd (2009). The idea that these concepts are interchangeable causes problems and confusion. Lloyd refers to Dyson (1999) who also points out the lack of clarity about the concept of inclusion. In the Dutch context, Dijkstra (2008) accentuates the same problems with the use of integration and inclusion.

Farrell (2001) defines integration as a status in which the educational setting stays unchanged and “additional arrangements” (Ainscow 1995, p.2.) are made to accommodate “exceptional pupils” (p.2). Inclusion, in contrast, means a preparedness to create an educational setting where the needs of all learners are met.

“Inclusion is a movement seeking to create schools that meet the needs of all students by establishing learning communities for students with and without disabilities, educated together in age appropriate general education classrooms in neighbourhood schools” (Kavale and Forness 2000, p.279).

It seems that, in the Dutch context, integration and inclusion are often confused or deliberately used interchangeably to avoid a more in-depth discussion about our

education system as is pointed out by Schuman (2007) and de Graaf (2010). An inclusive education system would offer the best possible opportunities for improving participation of learners with disabilities in society (Salamanca Statement 1994) which means that education needs to be redefined but this will, at least in the Dutch context, not take place in the near future. The Dutch government only uses the concept integration and not inclusion in policy documents related to Passend Onderwijs [Appropriate Education]. Without a redefinition of education as a whole, inclusion will be impossible as Lloyd (2010) illustrates, using the metaphor of a game. In this game former excluded groups are invited to join the game but the rules stay unchanged so the groups who already know the game have an advantage and others cannot participate in an equal way. This makes clear that full and equal participation of former excluded groups in the game is only possible after the rules of the game are changed. In current practice in education, children with special educational needs are supposed to fit into the existing system without changing the educational content and practice which makes it impossible for them to fully participate and benefit. Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) argue that this is inevitable since regular education has, in the past, not found the answers to include learners with special educational needs. The discussion about segregation, integration and inclusion is important for this research because the Dutch segregated education system might impede the chances of employment of the learners. An aim of this research is to elicit the views of learners, teachers and parents on the relationship between segregated education and employment. Oliver (2000) points out that segregation in education possibly enhances segregation in society. As discussed in section 1.1. the Act on the Quality of (Secondary) Special Education has the aim to increase employment which can be seen as a form of social inclusion (Abberley 2002). This means that a segregated system needs to increase inclusion. Farrell (2001) and Lloyd (2009, 2010) point out that it is unlikely that this will happen without a system change.

In the Dutch context, segregated special education will continue to play a role in the preparation of learners with disabilities for a place in society. To achieve social justice, social inclusion and full citizenship for learners with learning disabilities, professionals working in special education have to recognise that a segregated system might have disadvantages. This does not mean that special schools cannot contribute to the improvement of the situation of their learners. Oliver (1992) points out that including all children in one education system is part of a wider moral commitment of including all people with disabilities in society but he acknowledges that this is a long process.

Translating this moral commitment into political rights is something that can only be achieved by supporting disabled people and the parents of children with special needs as they struggle to empower themselves ( p.26).

Professionals working in special education can show commitment in practice by supporting their learners in this struggle.

This seems to confirm that, in a situation where special education still exists and education is not reconstructed in inclusive terms, it is necessary to challenge and try to improve special education practice itself, as part of this developing progress towards an inclusive society. Special education has been, and still can be criticised for an introverted way of looking at its own practice (Gallagher et al. 2004) but this could change. Special schools should join the debate about redefining the position of young people with disabilities in society, as suggested by Reindal (2008, 2010). Special schools have constant access to learners with disabilities and can contribute to the debate by giving these learners a voice in the discussion about their future (Lewis and Porter 2004, Lewis 2011). This seems to be supported by Dyson (2001) who suggests that the debate about the inclusion of people with disabilities in society cannot be limited to segregation or inclusion in education; it is part of the wider scope of social inclusion.

Its focus is on marginalisation, alienation and exclusion from employment – not on special needs or on disability as such (Dyson 2001, p.28).

An aim of this research is to contribute to the debate about the position of learners with disabilities in society. One important aspect of the position of a specific group of young people with disabilities does not seem to be the subject of a great deal of research, namely decision making about their own future by learners with learning disabilities who are in the transition from school to work. More participation in decisions about their own future is a factor in the empowerment of learners in education (Shier 2001, Corbett 2001). This might contribute to redefining the position of learners with learning difficulties in the transition from school to work. When learners are invited to participate in decisions this implies that teachers are willing to listen to them and give them power to decide but they also must be prepared to give up some of their own power (Cairns and Brennan 2005).

There is some criticism about the role of special schools in the debate about inclusion, about the position of people with disabilities in society and the way schools support and educate their learners. Rix (2011), for example, is critical about the role of ‘segregated providers’ (p.263) in the inclusion debate. His research in the UK shows that special schools seem to have adopted ideas from the social model but their websites show, at the same time, evidence of the deficit/medical model. According to Rix this suggests that when special schools or other institutions are absorbing and transforming processes, structures and languages might reflect a new discourse but they are in fact maintaining their position. They adopt language which is associated with inclusion but this is then connected to learners with special educational needs and not to the learning needs of all. Inclusion means that education is able to address the needs of all learners. When segregated providers suggest that they offer specialised services they frame themselves differently but do not contribute to inclusion because they still promote categorisation.

When special schools support learners in their struggle for social justice as suggested by Oliver (1992), they can have a positive contribution notwithstanding the concerns expressed by Rix (2011). This is also suggested by Skrtic et al. (2009, p.412) who encourages 'special educators to reconstruct their practices and discourses using interpretations that promote the values of democracy, community, participation and inclusion'. Greyling (2009) adds that quality and equality are inseparable in education and that educators need to be aware of barriers which could obstruct the development of all learners. Although Rix (2011), Skrtic et al. (2009) and Riddell and Weedon (2010) have different ideas about the role of special education, they share the view that research can deliver important contributions to the deconstruction of current practice and the reconstruction of education with the aim to support learners with learning difficulties in what they value doing. In the context of this research this means to support them effectively in the transition from school to employment. The findings of this research can possibly provide material to reflect on the current practice of transition education and how learners can be supported to enhance their chances of employment.

## *2.5. Transition.*

### *2.5.1. Transition from school to work.*

Employment can have positive effects on the participation of young people with disabilities in society and on their feelings of belonging and well-being as indicated by Winn and Hay (2009). Abberley (2002) and Skellern and Astbury (2012) specify that employment is an important aspect of social inclusion. This does not mean that employment is the overarching solution for all young people with learning difficulties. Abberley argues that employment should be facilitated for those who want it but that at the same time, society needs to valorise non-working lives for those who are unable to

work or value other activities. That transition has a broader perspective than employment alone is also pointed out by King et al. (2005).

Transition services should a) provide real-world opportunities for skill development; b) encourage youths' engagement in social, productivity, and leisure roles (a holistic perspective) so that employment status is not the sole concern; c) be designed to address each type of role, based on client need; d) take a lifespan approach; e) start early and involve youth, family, and others in the youths' environment and f) be customized to meet youths' life goals, values, interests and skills and be flexible and responsive to changing needs and situations ( Adapted from King et al. 2005, p.211).

A one-sided focus on transition from school to employment can potentially cause disappointment and feelings of failure because it is a possibility that employment is beyond the reach of some of the learners. The unemployment-rate of young people has, in the region where this research takes place, risen with 62% between August 2012 and August 2013 (UWV and SBB 2013). There are difficulties to create new jobs for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Bouma and Troost 2014, Huisman and Witteman 2014). Webb et al. (2014) indicate that young people with disabilities are still less likely to be employed compared to youth without disabilities. The combination of this high unemployment rate of young people in general and the fact that young people with disabilities are less likely to be employed does not enhance the chances of employment for the learners. Transition which incorporates a broader perspective can potentially prepare learners for a situation in which they are not employed since it can support them in thinking about and finding alternative activities. King et al. argue that in any situation transition from school to adult roles is not unproblematic. Learners need to find new roles in all kind of different situations which brings about anxiety about their future. Learners need support in this process which makes it important that teachers, families and other people in the environment of the learners are involved. Family

members or other trusted people can provide long term support for the learners which will enhance the chances of successful transition and achieving the lives they value. In this sense transition which incorporates broader perspectives connects with the capability approach (Terzi 2010) in the same way as transition from school to employment. The transition from school to adulthood in the broader perspective as proposed by King et al. but also in relationship with transition to employment as is part of this research, is a phase in which learners explore different and new identities (Solberg et al. 2002).

Rapley et al. (1998) argue that identity evolves from negotiation between people while Rapley (2004) adds that identity is dynamic and depends on the context and interactions with other people. Identity is a complex issue as pointed out by Vloet (2015), whose views relate to the ideas of Wenger (1998). Learners develop their identity in a dialogue with themselves and with their environment which has similarities with the dialogical process of developing a voice (Maybin 2013) discussed in 2.2. Developing a voice is a dynamic process and takes place in an environment formed by other people, for instance parents, family members, teachers, and friends. Sometimes learners will reproduce the views of other people as if they were their own but in other cases they will distance themselves from these views. Research by Mercer and Littleton (2007) indicates that education can assist learners to acquire new understandings and perspectives and develop their own voice. However, views on disability can influence expectations of the abilities of the learners and in that sense constrain this process.

What can be spoken and how it can be said are enabled or constrained by specific sociocultural expectations and interactional dynamics,... (Maybin 2013, p.395).

In this aspect, there are similarities between developing a voice and developing identity. The learners try to develop their own voice in a dialogical process between their own views and the views of other people. At the same time this dialogue is part of a process wherein they try to establish a positive identity (MacLeod 2013). Both in the process of developing a voice and in the process of developing identity they are influenced by the perceptions of disability in Dutch society. Nario-Redmond et al. (2013) argue that people who are considered to have disabilities face pervasive influence of the perceptions of other's on disability which can affect their process of identity development.

Watson (2002) argues that the process of identity development takes place in interaction or dialogue with the views of others. By aligning to or rejecting how other people may see them they can establish their own ideas about themselves. In this process they attempt to "establish a sense of unity between themselves and non-disabled people" (p.516). A person's identity or self develops as a product of self-determination, autonomy and choice. This means that the extent, to which the learners can determine their own future and are autonomous to make their own choices, influences their identity development. MacLeod et al. (2013) point out that stigmatisation leads to a discrepancy between an individual's personal and social identity and has negative consequences for that person. The learners in this research can decide what they consider important aspects of their personal identity but they are hindered by possible negative perceptions of disability which might shape their social identity. The process of identity development discussed above can lead to multiple identities which relate to the different positions a person can have.

Vloet argues that identity develops as a composition of different I-positions. The learners in this research also have different I- positions; I as a family member, I as a learner, I as person with a learning difficulty, I as a friend, I as a person with capabilities, I as a person who values employment. These multiple identities define a



person in different ways in different situations. People with disabilities often experience that others define them based on one aspect of their identity, their impairment. Beart et al. (2005) suggest that although identity has many layers and people have multiple identities it can sometimes be helpful to focus on one or two aspects of a person's identity. In this research the focus is on one aspect of their identity; the learner as potential employer. This is an identity the learners choose for themselves related to employment, impairment and disability. Their social identity is the identity as imposed upon them by others.

Although it is important to be aware of the broader perspective of identity, since the lives of young people with disabilities do not only consist of work, the focus of this thesis is on transition from school to work. This research investigates the views of learners who consider themselves capable to work and who value work as part of their participation in society. When learners make the choice for employment their education should support them to make this transition. The Salamanca Framework for Action (1994) states that;

...young people with special educational needs should be helped to make an effective transition from school to adult working life. Schools should assist them to become economically active and provide them with the skills needed in everyday life, offering training in skills which respond to the social and communication demands and expectations of adult life... (Salamanca Statement UNESCO 1994, p.34).

In the past, people with learning disabilities were not considered to be potential employees. This idea slowly changed when society became aware that many people with learning disabilities were motivated to work and able to do so (Gill 2008). A person with learning disabilities interviewed by Gill said:

Working makes me feel more important...it helps me to be meeting people. I am being something that I have always wanted to be... (p.12).

Young people with learning disabilities often face problems when they try to enter the labour market to pursue work (Beyer and Kaehne 2010). In the Dutch context, Kamps et al. (2010) and Crossover (2011) come to the same conclusion; young people with learning disabilities face barriers which puts them at a disadvantage when accessing the labour market. Some of these problems can be attributed to their impairments. Damen and Cordang (2007) specify that their communication skills might differ and that they may need support when learning complex tasks but society cannot use this as an excuse for their disadvantages in entering the labour market. Disabling factors or impairments cannot provide an explanation for barriers created by society although the effects of impairments need to be taken into consideration. A social relational angle or capability perspective on disability (Shakespeare 2006, Reindal 2008, Terzi 2010, Watson 2012), as discussed in 2.3., has the potential to find solutions and support learners in finding employment. The starting point of such an approach is that the learners have the right to make the choice about what they value doing. By interpreting their views, this research can support in developing a better understanding about the ideas of the learners. Grant (2008) states that young people with learning disabilities who are willing to work could provide employers with dedicated employees. In the process towards employment, careful transition planning is therefore an essential condition (Webb et al. 2014).

### *2.5.2. Transition planning.*

A key-factor for successful transition planning, found by the European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education [EADSNE] (2002, 2009), concerns the participation of the learner in his/her own transition planning. Participation of the learner with disabilities in the transition process is crucial for success. Participation in the development and assessment of transition planning has a relationship with recognition

of the autonomy, self-determination and independence of the learners (Wehmeyer and Palmer 2003, Fowler et al. 2007). Autonomy, self-determination and independence are complex concepts and it is often suggested that they are beyond the abilities of young people with learning difficulties because of their need for support. Skellern and Astbury (2012) argue that this is a misinterpretation of these concepts. Parents, teachers and employers can have a crucial role in developing these skills and enhance the self-confidence of the learners. Autonomy means that it is recognised that the learners have the right but also the ability to make their own decisions (Hall 2005). They can be supported by helping them in balancing out pros and cons of a decision without judgement or trying to affect it. The same can be said about self-determination and independence, the learners have the right to choose the life they value and need to be supported to achieve this. The points above relate back to listening to the learners and taking their views into consideration, discussed in 2.2. When schools offer sufficient training to enhance autonomy, self-determination and independence learners will have better opportunities for transition from school to work (Crossover 2011). Wehmeyer et al. (2009) suggest a self-determined learning model which stimulates the learners to take control over their own learning and empowers them to overcome barriers. This connects with research by Pearman et al. (2004), Ward et al. (2004) and King et al. (2005) who also emphasise the importance of learner involvement in the composition, realisation and evaluation of his/her transition planning. The views of learners and teachers on participation of the learners in the development and evaluation of the transition planning in this research can potentially provide more understanding of the position of the learners because it will provide insight in the differences and similarities in their views. This understanding can contribute to a discussion and reflection on the role of learners and teachers in transition planning. As suggested by Wehmeyer et al. (2009), the more learners have control over their own learning, the better they will be able to overcome barriers.

Participation of learners in transition planning is not the only factor which is important for successful transition from school to employment. Carter et al. (2014) suggest planning in which the perspectives of different individuals who have knowledge about the learner are integrated. This would also present opportunities for a broader perspective on transition planning as proposed by King et al. (2005), discussed in 2.5.1. In the transition planning from school to work it would be commendable to integrate the views of learners, parents, teachers, work-supervisors and employers in the plan. The integration of more views can have the advantage that this can help to reflect on the strengths of the learner and the areas where he/she might need support. On the other hand, with the involvement of more people, there is a risk that the views of the learner gets a less prominent place in the development of the plan.

When learners are less involved in the development of their own plan this might create a barrier for participation, especially when professionals and/or parents are over-protective. This happens regularly with individuals working or living with people with disabilities (Buntinx and Schalock 2010, Jingree and Finlay 2013) and is also discussed in relation to listening to learners in 2.2. This over-protection can lead to a situation where the personal choices of the learners are limited since their environment wants to protect them from making mistakes. Protection is an issue which will be addressed in the focus group interview with parents. The development of a successful transition plan, not only requires the integration of views of the learner, his/her parents, work-supervisors and employers. The plan also has to be specific about competences which are required for certain jobs because this can give direction to education in the transition phase from school to work.

### *2.5.3. Transition planning and employers.*

A transition plan has to be clear about skills or qualifications which need to be obtained by the learner, either through training specific skills, certificates or credits at school, or in a later stage at the workplace (EADSNE 2009). The competences which are needed

for specific jobs differ and can change. It is important that schools have knowledge about the latest developments. This makes the case for close cooperation between school and employers, which also has the advantage that building networks with employers can potentially assist to overcome possible negative perceptions of the abilities of the learners. A project in Norway, discussed in the EADSNE research, had a focus on cross sector communication and showed promising results. In this project employers were brought into the school to talk about their jobs with learners and their teachers. This provided both employers and schools with the opportunity to get to know each other and to learn about the skills needed for work and about the abilities learners possess.

An approach like this could also give schools and learners valuable information about abilities, which are needed for employment in specific areas. This information could be used in the transition plan of the learner. Some skills and abilities have already been described by employer's organisations and are used by special schools in the Netherlands. An example of progressing connections, between the business community and schools, is the incorporation of formal certificates which are recognised by trade organisations such as the Dutch Cleaner's Organisation and the Dutch Catering Organisation. When learners obtain these certificates they have the opportunity to work as assistant in the kitchen of a restaurant or assistant cleaner which are existing formal jobs in the Netherlands. Certificates can have a positive influence on the chances for employment and provide employers information about the skills of the learners (Kamps et al. 2010). In 2007 the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) ascertained a lack of information on the side of employers about the capabilities to work of young people with disabilities. The CPB found that employers need information about the strengths and weaknesses of learners with learning difficulties which is not available to them now. They want information about the level of vocational skills, openness for coaching and direction when fulfilling

activities. Aim of this research is to determine whether the employers, who participate in this research, have comparable views. Research by Taylor et al. (2004) indicates that employers consider abilities to learn on the job and social skills more important than academic skills. Social integration and interaction at the workplace are also mentioned as significant factors for successful employment of people with learning disabilities by Beyer and Robinson (2009). This substantiates the necessity for intensive collaboration between school and employers.

According to the CPB employers need to have insight into possibilities for support and the availability of support for the long term. This kind of support is linked to government policies, which have the aim to increase participation in employment of people with disabilities. These policies can be both facilitating but can also create barriers (Lunt and Thornton 1994, O'Brien et al. 2003). When government policies aim to promote employment of people with disabilities by using financial incentives for employers this often has positive effects on a short time basis. When these advantages for employers disappear due to change in economic circumstances or change of government there is a very negative effect since the lack of financial compensation becomes a reason not to employ people with disabilities. Policies which are flexible and offer support for employers and employees produce the best results, the same can be said for measurements relating to benefits for employers and employees. Policies can become barriers when different government sectors do not coordinate their measurements and these individually positive actions are in conflict with each other (Lunt and Thornton 1994). The issues discussed above seem to suggest that teachers working in transition education require knowledge about a range of subjects. They have an important role in the transition of their learners and can become the mediator between school and employment.

#### *2.5.4. The role of the teacher.*

It would seem that schools need to develop specialists in transition from school to work who can support both learners and other teachers in the transition phase, this view is also supported by Pearman et al. (2004). The special expertise about transition requires knowledge about culture and processes in the business community but also about policies and measures of local and national government which are beneficial for transition to work. Teachers need to be able to connect with their learners and at the same time connect with people working in companies that have jobs to offer for their learners. Morningstar and Clark (2009) mention specific knowledge special education teachers need when working in transition education;

- Knowledge of the principles and basic concepts of transition education and services.
- Knowledge of models of transition education and services.
- Skills in using strategies for developing, organizing, and implementing transition education and services.
- Knowledge and use of collaboration competencies.
- Knowledge and skills to address systemic problems in transition services delivery (pp.344-345).

The teachers are included in this research to elicit their views on the role they have in the development of transition planning for their learners. Teachers have to be able to explain the transition in such a way that it is understandable for all parties involved, including the learners, with clear tasks and responsibilities for all stakeholders. That this is an important aspect of transition planning is also maintained by the Styrian Association for Education and Economics [SAEE] (2010).

All stakeholders who are responsible for partial aspects of the overarching transition process should see this process under a common and comprehensive perspective, with the commitment to communicate and to co-operate in the support of an individual smooth and successful transition process, also in a perspective of inclusion and social cohesion (p.24).

In the planning and evaluation process of the transition plan, assessments can provide valuable information about qualities and weaknesses of learners. In this sense assessments can help in planning and formulation of a common perspective (Michaels and Ferrara 2005). This means that teachers need to develop new skills such as the ability to carry out and interpret work skills related assessments of their learners.

More important than the knowledge about transition planning is the ability to enhance and monitor the involvement of learners in the development of the transition plan. The participation of learners is crucial for successful transition as is also suggested by Wehmeyer et al. (2009). The emphasis on participation of learners is similar to the notion of Person-Centred Planning (PCP) as suggested by Sax (2002). In such an approach the learners set the agenda which has the potential to expand their influence on their education. That the agenda is set by the learner is a crucial aspect of PCP and will require a facilitating attitude of teachers which might be different from what they are used to. Shogren and Plotner (2012) argue that transition planning is mostly initiated by teachers and/or other professionals in the school. Transition plans are often presented to parents and/or learners, but not written in collaboration as is part of approaches that make use of person-centred planning. An approach which puts the learners in the centre of their own development requires that professionals hand over some of their power. This has also been discussed in connection with listening to the learners and taken their views into consideration in section 2.2. Successful transition and the development of a practice, which makes this possible, is a continuing process. It needs professionals who have an understanding of society and through reflection an



understanding of themselves and their role as teachers (Sachs 2000, 2001, 2003). Carr and Kemmis (1986) also promote the development of a critical and reflective attitude for professionals in education with the aim to improve their teaching practice and the situation of their learners.

## *2.6. Summary.*

The findings from the discussion of literature indicate that it is important to interpret the voice of learners in relation to the setting in which they express this voice (Fine 1994). A voice is not only influenced by the setting in which it is produced but is formed in dialogue with its environment (Maybin 2013). This substantiates the choice to investigate the views of the learners in connection with the views of parents, teachers, employers and the way learners are described in school documents.

An important finding is that listening to the learners is complex and requires that people involved are prepared to give up some of their power. Listening and being heard are interrelated. In a situation where the learners have little control over their lives they are more likely to think or feel that they are not heard (Winter 2006). This has consequences for this research since the learners are in situation where they are possibly not really in control over their lives. Listening is connected with participation in decision-making. Learners with learning difficulties are in a situation where listening to them and involving them in decisions is influenced by a focus on vulnerability, incapacity and deficit (Jingree and Finlay 2013). This makes it likely that their voices are not always taken into consideration.

The way their education is organised is influenced by the understanding of disability in society (Barton and Landeman 1993). Perspectives on disability have developed from an individual medical model into social models, social relational models and capability perspectives on disability. Authors like Terzi (2004), Shakespeare (2006) and Reindal (2010) opted for a multi-dimensional understanding of the complexity of disability and

impairment. Terzi (2010) developed a capability perspective on disability which emphasises that disability and impairment are part of human diversity. Dutch education practice is still influenced by an individual-medical understanding of disability which has led to categorisation of learners with disabilities and the development of segregated special schooling.

It is important that young people with disabilities participate in the development of their transition plans in an early stage. It would be commendable that schools train learners in real-world situations with an emphasis on autonomy, self-determination and independence to enhance chances of successful transition (King et al. 2005). The importance of these skills is confirmed by Taylor et al. (2004) and Kamps et al. (2010) who indicate that employers are mainly interested in the abilities of the learners to learn on the job and less in academic skills. Learning on the job involves self-confidence (Skellern and Astbury 2012), which is enhanced when learners feel autonomous and independent. Schools need to be aware of this since it confirms the importance of a teaching practice which enhances autonomy, self-determination and independence. To support learners in this process teachers need to develop specialist knowledge (Morningstar and Clark 2009) as discussed in 2.5.3., while the views of the learners need to become the starting point for transition planning.

## *CHAPTER 3.*

### *Methodology*

#### *3.1. Introduction.*

The intention of this research is to investigate the views of a group of nineteen learners with learning difficulties on their transition from school to work in a school for Secondary Special Education in the Netherlands. As discussed in Chapter 2, the main aim is to explore the view of the learners themselves but these views cannot be detached from the views of the parents, teachers and employers and the way the role of the learners is described in school documents relating to the transition from school to work. As discussed in Chapter 2, the voice of learners and also their identity develops as a dialogical process (Maybin 2013, Vloet 2015). This process takes place in dialogue with their environment. Parents and teachers are part of their current environment which makes it vital to include their views. The views of employers are important since they influence the chances of employment of the learners. The school documents can provide data which may give an indication about how the learners are positioned in school policies which describe the transition from school to work.

#### *3.2. Research paradigm.*

Research into educational practice is a broad concept and is difficult to define. There are many different approaches to research and the choice, which approach to use depends on the worldview of the researcher and aims of the research. Cohen et al. (2000), argue that research is about understanding our world.

...it recognizes that research is concerned with understanding the world and that this is informed by how we view our world(s) what we take understanding to be, and what we see as the purpose of understanding (p.3).

Brew (2001) emphasises the complexity of defining research.

There is no one thing or even a set of things which research *is*. It is obviously a complex phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to any kind of essential quality. Indeed some academic researchers and managers would argue that any attempt to discuss research in general is at worst impossible and at best foolhardy. Surely, so the argument goes, research has to be discussed in relation to its disciplinary context (pp.21-22).

This research is about understanding a part of the world of learners with learning difficulties; their views on their position in the transition from school to employment. This understanding has the aim to construct new knowledge which can make a contribution to a debate in schools about the position of these learners in education.

A positivistic research paradigm would describe the position of the learners in facts and numbers and would try to create theories about the transition from school to employment. Positivism argues that the world can be described as it really is, as an entity which exists separately from us (Cohen et al. 2000). Facts and numbers can have valuable contributions in understanding the position of learners. The research of UWV and SBB (2013), discussed in 2.5.1. about the rise of the un-employment rate for young people with 62% in the region where this research will be carried out gives valuable information. However, this kind of research fails to contribute to an understanding of transition from school to work from the perspective of the learners.

This research aims to investigate the views of the learners in relation with views of parents, teachers and employers. This means that the research starts with the views of individuals and tries to understand their interpretations of their situation. This kind of understanding is a feature of interpretive research. The interpretive paradigm rejects objective knowledge and understanding and argues that people, as social beings, are always subjective because their understanding anticipates giving meaning and pre-

understanding (Scott and Usher 2011). Social reality is constructed and only exists as an interpretation by the individual. In this research the participants will give their interpretation of the reality as they experience this reality. The researcher aims to understand this reality but is also influenced by his/her pre-understandings of this reality (Gadamar 2004). He argues that researchers cannot escape nor suspend pre-understandings but they can use them to acquire knowledge when they are aware of their existence.

The research has characteristics of interpretive research in the sense that it has the aim to understand transition from school to work from the perspective of the learners. However, this understanding is not solely concerned with creating knowledge. It has the aim to give the learners a voice and to generate knowledge, which contributes to a debate about the position of learners with learning difficulties in education, preferably with the involvement of these learners in the schools. The views of the learners will be the starting point, which can possibly show that their views can provide valuable information. These are features which positions the research in a critical theory and critical educational research paradigm (Cohen et al. 2000). The research has the aim to contribute to the improvement of practice but these improvements will not be part of a plan of action during the research process (McKernan 1996), which indicates that the research does not qualify as action research. Walsham (1993, 2006) argues that research can have characteristics of both the interpretive and critical paradigms. An approach which seems to incorporate features of these paradigms is the reflexive interpretive approach developed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) which is discussed in the next section.

### *3.3. A Reflexive interpretive approach.*

The research will employ a reflective or reflexive methodology as proposed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) based on “careful interpretation and reflection” (p.9).

All empirical data in this research; the statements of learners, employers, teachers, parents, conclusions from document analysis of school documents and data from questionnaires, will be considered the results of interpretation. Reflection can be defined as an interpretation of interpretation with an emphasis on a critical exploration of the interpretations of the researcher. Gergen (1999) defined reflexivity as:

The attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the "obvious", to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints (Gergen 1999, p.50).

An argument for an interpretive approach towards research, when learners with learning disabilities are involved, can be found in the view of Wright (2008) who discussed the aims of what he called "inclusive research" (p.33). In the view of Wright this kind of research should try to understand and interpret the voice of the learners and promote inclusive practice. This research aims to elicit knowledge which can contribute to a debate about more inclusive practice concerning learners with learning difficulties. Detheridge (2000) emphasises the complexity of research where learners with learning disabilities are involved. He argues that pupils with multiple and complex needs cannot be considered a homogenous group which makes large scale quantitative research unsuitable. In such a situation small-scale reflexive interpretive research will be more appropriate and can provide more understanding of the views of these learners.

Interpretation of the views of learners with learning disabilities and the context, in which they develop and express their views requires an explanatory model, which takes all aspects, related to the interpretation of the participants, into account. Only then the researcher will be able to comprehend and represent their views. Cohen et al. (2000) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) criticise induction, deduction and a combined inductive-deductive approach as means to comprehend social phenomena. Even

though “these approaches have had enormous influence in the development of science” (Cohen et al. p.5) they can be criticised for being “shallow in the explanation of underlying processes and tendencies” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, p.3). In this research different understandings of disability and human diversity can be seen as possible underlying processes and in this sense influence the pre-understandings of those involved. Gadamer (2004) points out that “...all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice...” (p.272). In this sense prejudices are necessary in the process of interpretation and understanding and do not have a negative value.

Thus “prejudice” certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgement, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value (p.273).

Scott and Usher (2011) use Gadamer’s argument and introduce the concept pre-understanding to define the relationship between prejudice and understanding.

Understanding something is always prejudiced in the sense that it is a process of requiring an initial projection that anticipates meaning and which orients the process. This initial projection or pre-understanding is part of the subject’s situatedness; the subject’s location and standpoint in history, society and culture (Scott and Usher 2011, p.29).

Beliefs and ideas of the researcher are a result of his/her pre-understandings and are part of the framework which can be used to establish methodological understanding. In this process of interpretation and giving meaning, the researcher will reflect on his/her own pre-understandings but also on the pre-understandings the participants in the research use to construct their social reality.

When disability is understood from an individual psycho-medical model, people will probably have different views on impairment and disability in comparison with people who understand disability from a social relational perspective on disability. These

different understandings can influence their ideas about education, participation or employment of learners with disabilities.

An explanatory model, which includes understanding these underlying patterns, is abduction (Alvesson and Sköldberg ). It has characteristics of induction and deduction but with more depth and potential for interpretive research.

The analysis of the empirical fact(s) may very well be combined with, or preceded by, studies of previous theory in the literature; not as mechanical application on single cases but as a source of inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding. The research process, therefore, alternates between (previous) theory and empirical facts whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other (p.4).

Abduction has a strong reflexive component that relates to the “reflexive dialogue” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.9) which is part of the analytic process used in thematic analysis. This reflexive dialogue has the aim to interpret data and thematise meaning (Holloway and Todres 2003). This process of interpretation and giving meaning is subjective since it is influenced by the “initial projection” (Scott and Usher 2011, p.29) or “fore-projection” (Gadamer 2004, p.269) of the researcher. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) refer to Hanson (1958) when they argue that data “are placed in a certain frame of reference” (p.6). In the process of thematic analysis the researcher will interpret data within his/her frame of reference. It can be argued that this frame of reference and prejudices or pre-understandings are interrelated.

Hanson (1958) argues that all data have a theoretical component. He underpins the importance of the alternation between theory and empirical facts which is a feature of abduction. In the process of thematic analysis this means that themes, which are derived from the data, are related to theory but also that theory anticipates themes. In the reflexive dialogue, which is part of thematic analysis, the researcher gives meaning



but also revises meaning in a methodological way with the aim to come to methodologically conscious understanding.

Methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves (Gadamer 2004, p.272).

Using abduction as an explanatory model for research, makes it possible to give an in-depth interpretation of the transition process in a school, the view of the learners and the setting in which they express these views. In this process of interpretation there will be a constant alternation between empirical data and theory to develop an understanding of this particular situation. In this research it means that statements made in focus groups or individual interviews will be related back to theory regarding that statement. An example might clarify what is meant here; When a teacher in an interview says he is listening to the learners, while learners indicate that in their view, teachers are not listening to them, abduction indicates that this difference needs to be related back to theory about listening to learners. The theory may assist to explain the underlying pattern which causes this difference in interpretation.

An important aspect which also needs to be discussed in connection with abduction is the perspective of the research. It is the intention to listen to the learners, try to understand their views and in this way give them a voice. As discussed in section 2.2., the process of listening, understanding and giving a voice is not unproblematic. The way learners view their own capabilities, the difficulties they experience in the transition from school to work and their ideas about work are not facts. Their views and experiences are influenced by the situation they know, by the views of their parents, by the views of teachers, by the way their education is organised and by the current socio-economic and political situation in the Netherlands.

Fine (1994) argues that the concept of voice offers a tremendous opportunity for researchers interested in generating critical, counter hegemonic analyses of institutional arrangements. However, although these voices may contain critical insights, they are embedded in the scripts of dominant groups (Scott and Usher 2011, p.19).

Taking Fine's arguments into consideration means that both the perspective of the learners and the perspective of the researcher need thorough analysis. By giving learners a voice this research entails the obligation to use the outcomes of this research for a discussion about the improvement of educational practice. Clark (2011) substantiates this view when he says;

Educational researchers, then, must be interested in the practical outcome (the "good") to which they have, in effect, been contributing. Educational research that does not so contribute is an oxymoron (p.51).

Educational researchers are at the very least required to propose implementation or use of their findings for the improvement of educational practice.

Scott and Usher (2011) explain that it is often assumed that because researchers bring in their own beliefs and ideas about the world and their research topic, they need to bracket these ideas when they try to understand and represent the participants of their research. Bracketing ideas and beliefs does not mean that these beliefs and ideas are disregarded; the researcher merely temporarily suspends his or her subjectivity and perspective. Gadamer (2004) however, argues that it is not possible to suspend pre-understandings and that these can actually be used in the process of interpretation and add rigour to this process. Scott and Usher (2011) argue that by using pre-understandings the researcher explores how meanings are generated and constructed.

To know, one must be aware of one's pre-understandings even though one cannot transcend them. At the same time, however, although they are an

essential starting point, they need to be left open to modification in the course of the research (p.32).

The importance of openness to modification of one's own pre-understandings can also be found in the thoughts of Arendt (1978) who argues that it is necessary to use imagination to take other perspectives into account.

In the view of the researcher disability is part of human diversity. An aspect of this view is the notion that the capabilities of the learners can probably be developed in the best way in an inclusive school system. However, this research is not about the views of the researcher, it is intended to investigate the views of the participants in the research. This means that the researcher needs to use pre-understandings to develop an understanding of possible other perspectives on disability. As is argued by Gadamer and Scott and Usher the researcher must be prepared to modify his/her own views since the aim of research is to understand the views of others.

Before the different methods of data collection and analysis are discussed, it is necessary to consider the ethical issues which are part of this research. Learners with learning disabilities are a vulnerable group whose interests are easily misrepresented (Walmsley 2001). This vulnerability makes it essential to regard the ethical part of this research with a rigorous systematic approach.

### *3.4. Ethics.*

The participation of learners with learning difficulties in this research introduces specific ethical issues, which can be very complex and will arise at various moments and various levels during the whole research process (Cohen et al. 2000). These issues of ethical complexity, such as power relations, research aims and consent, have been recognised and discussed by many researchers in the area (Lewis and Porter 2004, Snelgrove 2005, Scott et al. 2006, Leighton 2009 and Lewis 2011). Considering the complexity of research where learners with learning disabilities are involved and the

different roles of the researcher; member of the school management, chairperson of the Individual Needs Committee and researcher, it is important to deal with the ethical aspects of this research in an effective way. The “methodological tool for effective ethical analysis” as developed by Stutchbury and Fox (2009, p.495-496) makes it possible to combine ethical analysis with the reflexive methodology introduced by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009). Stutchbury and Fox developed a grid which can be used for ethical analysis of research on different levels. An example of the grid is shown in Appendix 2. Stutchbury and Fox distinguish different layers which represent ethical aspects of research.

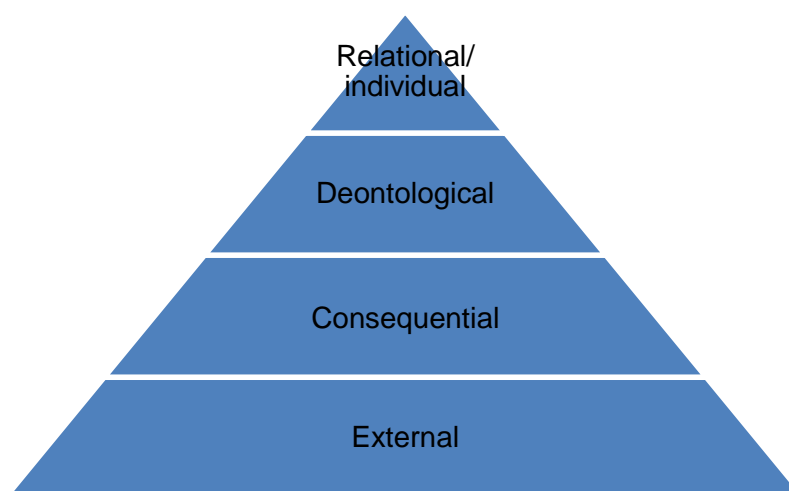


Figure 3.1. Layers in the ethical grid (Stutchbury and Fox 2009).

The first layer is called the external layer and can assist the researcher in considering external issues such as laws, codes of practice but also implications of the context in which the research takes place. In this case the research will be carried out in accordance with the BERA (2011) revised ethical guidelines for educational research and the Quality and standards handbook of the University of Roehampton (2010). The research will be carried out with the necessary permission from the school principal and the school board.

The consequential layer encourages the researcher to think about consequences for his/her research, for the institution where the research takes place and/or for individuals or groups of learners. McNamee (2001) points out that the claim of some educational researchers that their research is beneficial for marginalised groups embodies a paradox; speaking on behalf of less powerful groups such as learners with learning difficulties could lead to misplaced paternalism. The moral justification for speaking on behalf of them however, lies in making sense of concrete circumstances which may lead to improvements on the long term. as discussed in 3.2. The view of McNamee substantiates the choice for a reflexive interpretive approach. This research has the aim to understand the position of learners in the transition phase from school to work . This understanding can possibly create new knowledge which can contribute to a debate which may lead to improvements although the relationship between contributions to a debate and improvement is not straightforward (Cohen et al. 2000).

The deontological layer concerns the way the research is carried out. It supports reflection on the explanation of the aims of the research to the participants and on the procedures which are put in place which give them the possibility to withdraw. The position of the researcher in the school will determine the power relationship with the learners participating in this research but might also influence his/her position towards parents and teachers. These issues which will be discussed in 3.6. The power relations between researcher and learners as participants are also an issue in participation of the learners in a more general sense. Snelgrove (2005) points out that there is a risk of coercion of learners to participate in the research even with considerable attention to the voluntary basis of participation. It is very difficult to be certain about fully informed consent when learners with learning difficulties are involved as suggested by Scott et al. (2006). Learners with learning difficulties often have a gap between their chronological age and their developmental age. Related to this difference Scott et al. (2006), refer to the legal distinction of being considered Gillick competent which means

that a learner is able to understand what is proposed by the researcher. The learner “achieves a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable them to understand fully what is proposed” (Morrow and Richards 1996, p.95), and has “sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a choice in his or her own interests” (Harbour 2004, p.188). A dilemma is the role of the learners when they are eighteen years of age. In the Dutch legislation these learners are legally entitled to make their own decisions. Learners are even encouraged to make their own decisions concerning their own future. Asking parents for permission to interview their child after the age of eighteen is not considered desirable in the Netherlands. Wehmeyer et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of self-determination of learners with learning difficulties. It would be inconsistent to deny the learners the right to make their own decisions concerning participation in research. Therefore, in this research, when learners have agreed to participate, their parents will be informed about this decision. When parents do not want their child to participate, this will be discussed with the learner but he/she will make the final decision about participation. In the situation where learners have not yet become eighteen years of age their parents have to make the final decision about participation. All learners and their parents will be informed that they will be free to withdraw from the research without giving reasons. One of the teachers will act as a person of trust, who can be informed by learners that they want to withdraw, when they find it difficult to inform the researcher in person.

Schostak and Schostak (2008) suggest that the researcher creates knowledge from his/her perspective and emphasise the connection between knowledge and trust. The researcher creates knowledge by gathering and analysing information, when participants provide information they have to trust the researcher in how he/she uses this information. They connect representation of the participants with the self of the researcher, to whom they refer as the expert.

Has the expert been responsible enough to keep herself informed of developments in the field? Has she been conscientious, and realistic in her self-assessment of how reliable a judgement she is able to produce? To answer such questions is to make a statement about both moral and epistemic character (p.159).

Schostak and Schostak here point out the importance of reflexivity. Their views can be seen as support for the use of a reflexive methodology where the researcher reflects critically on his/her own interpretations as is part of the methodology proposed by Alvesson and Sköldberg used in this research.

The uppermost layer in the ethical grid developed by Stutchbury and Fox (2009), which can be found in Appendix 2. concerns the individual/relational aspects. The relational/individual layer supports the researcher in considering issues such as his/her relationship with the different participants and whether learners and teachers are treated in the same way. Key people in this research are the learners since it is the aim to hear their voices in their transition from school to employment. The purpose of the research and the role of the researcher will be explained to them. All focus group interviews will be carried out twice in which the second focus group interview will be used to validate the information from the first session. Parents, teachers and employers will be informed in a similar way. Their consent to participate will be recorded at the beginning of each interview.

The different layers of the ethical grid of Stutchbury and Fox provided a tool to reflect on the different ethical aspects of this research to ensure that the research will be carried out in an ethical way which does justice to all participants.

### *3.5. Research Methods.*

This research will employ different ways of collecting data such as focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires and documentary analysis. The

analysis of data will primarily be carried by using thematic analysis. Using and combining the strengths of different methods and combining them will give the possibility of a wider and deeper understanding of the views and position of learners with learning difficulties, their parents, teachers and employers on the transition from school to work. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011) argue that making pragmatic choices for different methods to unravel aspects of a research topic can enhance the outcomes of such a research.

### *3.6. Data collection.*

#### *3.6.1. Interviews.*

Interviews are an essential part of this research and will be used to elicit views of the participants. Teachers and employers will be interviewed individually while learners and parents will be interviewed in focus groups as explained below.

Lewis and Porter (2004) argue that when young people with learning difficulties are involved it is important that the subject of the interview is part of their life world. When this is the case it is more likely that the interviews will have meaning for the learners. In this research the learners will be interviewed about their views on the transition from school to employment. This is a topic which plays a significant role in their lives. Depending on their age they will leave school in about two to three years and some even earlier. This indicates that the subject of the interviews has probably meaning for them although this does not indicate that all topics which are relevant in the transition from school to work will have meaning for all participating learners.

Eliciting people's views rests on the assumption that the subject is one on which they have an opinion. Therefore responses are likely to be limited if questions are asked outside a meaningful context or if those questions are perceived as having no relevance or interest to the person themselves (Lewis and Porter 2004, pp.194-195).



Cohen et al. (2000) suggest that there is a risk that young interviewees and/or young people with disabilities will give answers they think the researcher wants to hear. Obviously it is important to create a situation which will minimise the risk that this will happen. To encourage the learners to present their views and not give opinions they think the researcher wants to hear, they will be interviewed in focus groups. Kaehne and O'Connell (2010) argue that focus groups enhance the involvement of participants in the interviews and also have the advantage that there is more interaction between participants in such a way that their agenda can predominate (Cohen et al. 2000). Focus group interviews have the potential to address the unequal power relations, which are present in other forms of interviews since the participants are in the majority and can support each other (Roulston 2010).

In this research the aim of increasing the involvement of the learners by using focus groups is intended to provide access to richer data which can give a better representation of the voice of the participants. Increased participation also adds to the value of research as indicated by Watson (2012). The researcher will take the role of facilitator and will try to encourage the discussions between the participating learners. This has the potential to increase the input of the learners since the discussions will not follow a pattern of questions and answers. The topics, which will be discussed are not completely pre-determined, although the researcher will have the possibility to introduce topics which are considered important when they do not come up in the discussions. A disadvantage might be that by using focus groups the researcher gives up some control over the research agenda. Northway (1998) considers it a risk when interviewees get too much influence on the research agenda. The researcher has to be aware of this although in research which aims to elicit the views of the learners the researcher has to be flexible. More interaction and involvement of the learners can be considered more important than complete control over the research agenda.

Parents will also be interviewed in a focus group in order to enhance the interaction and the possibility that participants can bring in the topics they consider important. It can also be considered an advantage that by using a focus group, the parents outnumber the interviewer since a power issue can also play a role when interviewing the parents because the researcher is also part of the management team of the school. The focus group interview with the parents will be more structured than the focus group interviews with the learners because issues which are brought forward by the learners will be used as a framework for the discussion.

Teachers and employers will be interviewed using individual semi-structured interviews. In the interviews with the teachers the power issue as discussed in relation to the focus group interviews can be an issue since the researcher is part of the management team and chair-person of the Individual Needs Committee. This committee evaluates progress of learners and Individual Educational Plans with the teachers and gives advice regarding these plans and the transition plans which are both written by the teachers. In order to address the power issue, the choice has been made to discuss the different roles of the researcher before the interviews. However, It might still be possible that the answers of teachers will be influenced by the different roles of the researcher. Silverman (1993) suggests that this can be avoided by using highly structured interviews but this would restrict the interviewees in giving their unique perspective on the transition from school to employment of the learners. Kvale (1996) argues that there is an asymmetrical power relation in every interview since the interviewer sets the agenda, asks questions and defines the situation, while the interviewee is more passive and might feel scrutinised. This is an issue which also applies to the interviews with employers. On the other hand the teachers and employers also have power over the researcher in the sense that they choose which information they share and how they share it.

### *3.6.2. Questionnaires.*

The questionnaires will be used to collect data from employers. The use of questionnaires has the advantage that it provides the researcher with data from more respondents. The data will be structured and relatively straightforward to analyse (Cohen et al. 2000). In this research the number of respondents is limited to ten and the use of open-ended questions makes it more difficult to quantify the results but the results can give information about views of employers. The views of employers can assist to address the research questions from different viewpoints. The questionnaire will consist of ten open-ended questions in which the research questions will be incorporated. The purpose of open-ended questions is to give the employers freedom to answer without having to choose structured responses. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) indicate that open-ended questions have the potential to provide much richer data which in this research can possibly derive insights into the thoughts of employers which would not be possible when using pre-determined categories. However, the use of open-ended questions can have some disadvantages. Cohen et al. (2000) point out the risk that respondents can find answering open-ended questions too demanding. McKernan (1996) suggests that participants might try to produce responses, they think are expected from them, which can give a misleading view of the true opinions of the employers. The questions will be prepared bearing in mind that leading and complex questions should be avoided and that instructions and questions need to be as neutral as possible without the use of negatives or double negatives (Cohen et al. 2000).

### *3.7. Analysis of the data.*

#### *3.7.1. Preparation of the data for analysis.*

The complexity of the data from the focus group interviews with the learners requires preparation of the data. Focus group interviews do not follow a pattern of questions and

answers and the interactions between participants can sometimes be confusing (Kaehne and O'Connel 2010).

The focus group interviews will be transcribed based on the notes which will be taken during the interviews. Parts where the discussions drift away from the research topics will not be transcribed. The focus group interviews will be prepared for further analysis by using meaning condensation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, pp.205-207).

The use of focus group interviews can lead to complex texts since interviewees might speak at the same time and it might not always be clear who said what. Meaning condensation gives the researcher the opportunity to deal with this complexity.

Meaning condensation can serve to analyse extensive and often complex interview texts by looking for natural meaning units and explicating their main themes... (p.207).

After transcription of the interview, the whole text will be read several times. The second step will be to determine the "natural units" (p.206). Each fragment that addresses a topic or has other signs of coherence will be considered a natural meaning unit. The third step will be to decide what the "central theme" (p.206) is of what was said. This means that the natural units as understood by the researcher will be condensed into a shorter central theme which represents the meaning of what was said by the participants. Contrasting views in a natural unit will lead to different central themes. The list of central themes which will follow from this preparation process will then be used for further analysis using thematic analysis as will be discussed below. The school documents will be analysed using conceptual analysis (Colorado State University 2013). The focus group interview with parents and the individual interviews will be transcribed and analysed also using thematic analysis.

### *3.7.2. Thematic Analysis.*

Cohen et al. (2000) points out that there are many different ways to carry out meaningful analyses of interview data such as counting frequencies, noting patterns, or constructing theories. Approaches to qualitative data analysis can represent different theoretical perspectives. However, Guest et al. (2012) argue that theoretical perspectives should not define or exclude the methods which are used for analysing data. Analysing data means that the researcher attempts to make sense of the data and tries to answer how the data address the research questions. This requires a systematic approach not only in the process of data collection but also in the phase of analysing data and interpreting these data. In this research the data will be derived from different groups of participants and sources, learners, parents, teachers, employers and school documents. This indicates that the tool, which will be used for analysis needs to be flexible and provide a structure which can be employed in all datasets. Braun and Clarke (2006), Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a flexible and useful tool for the analysis of data, which can be used independently from specific theoretical frameworks. The school documents require a different form of analysis since the aim of that analysis is to determine concepts in a text which makes conceptual analysis more suitable as will be discussed in 3.7.3. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) emphasise the reflexive component of the analytic process as an advantage of using thematic analysis. Alhojailan (2012) also accentuates the flexibility of thematic analysis and considers it an appropriate tool to link different concepts and opinions.

Thematic analysis can appear in different forms, in this research the type of thematic analysis which is used can be characterised as Applied Thematic Analysis [ATA] (Guest et al. 2012).

...the ATA approach is a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and

credible. Our method draws from a broad range of several theoretical and methodological perspectives, but in the end, its primary concern is with presenting the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible (pp.15, 16).

Thematic analysis and also applied thematic analysis are characterised by a number of phases (Braun and Clarke 2006).

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Process</b>
<b>1. Familiarizing yourself with the data.</b>	Transcribing (parts of) the data, reading and re-reading and noticing first relationships between data and noting initial ideas.
<b>2. Generating initial codes.</b>	Coding interesting parts of data in a systematic way. Coding as many themes/patterns as possible keeping the context in mind.
<b>3. Searching for themes.</b>	Merging codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to a theme.
<b>4. Reviewing themes.</b>	Checking if themes form a coherent pattern in relation to the codes and to the entire data set. Considering alternative themes and interpretations.
<b>5. Defining and naming themes.</b>	On-going analysis to refine each theme and generate the holistic story of the total analysis.
<b>6. Producing the report.</b>	The final opportunity for analysis. Selecting examples which underpin the analysis. Relating back the analysis to the research questions and literature.

Figure 3.2. Table of different phases used in thematic analysis.

The procedure of identifying, selecting themes and deciding how to report about these findings, is an active process. Themes do not emerge by themselves; they are a result of constant reflection on the entire data set, the coded data segments and the analyses by the researcher. This underpins the importance of a reflexive attitude of the researcher which is part of the reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009),

which is the approach used in this research. The identification and selection of themes differs for each component of this research and will start during the process of data collection.

The process starts when the analyst begins to notice, and look for, patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data-this may be during data collection (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.15).

In this stage the analysis can still be broad and intuitive with changing perspectives (Cohen et al. (2000)). The first step in the systematic analysis of the data will be to go back to the findings in literature which give direction to the analysis.

The next step will be to code the data using initial codes such as Listening or Participation in Decisions. These codes will then be merged into specific codes which will be defined to distinguish them from each other. Codes will be merged into themes and all data which are considered to be part of a theme will be brought together. These themes will be used for further analysis to determine if and how they constitute a coherent whole. This will be done by relating them back to each other but also to the entire dataset and the findings in literature.

The data in this research derive from different sources and will all be analysed in their own right but also for their relationship with the data from the focus group interviews with the learners as shown in Figure 3.3.

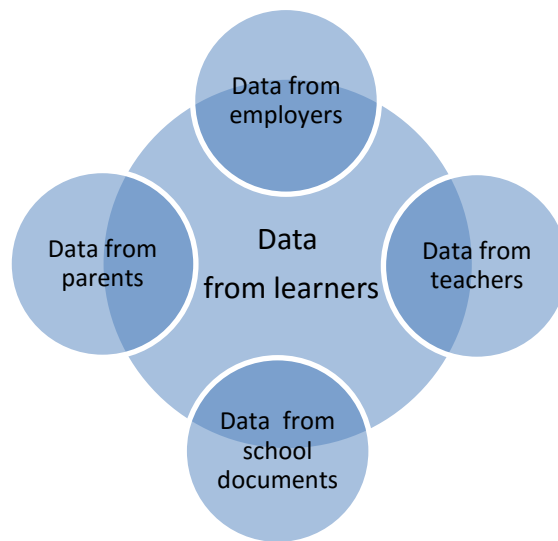


Figure 3.3. Relationship between data.

The data from the focus group interviews with the learners are at the centre of the research and can be considered as the primary data. All data from the other sources will be regarded as secondary data. These data provide information about the setting in which the voice of the learners is heard. The intention is that by putting the data analysis from the interviews with learners at the centre, their position, at least in this research, becomes less marginalized. Their views offer an opportunity to listen to and analyse alternative framings of reality, which is part of reflexivity according to Gergen (1999). He pointed out the importance of the comparison of different standpoints as discussed earlier in 3.3.

Reflexivity is important in the whole research process from the choice of the research topic to the analytic phase of this research and the presentation of findings.



### *3.7.3. Analysis of school documents.*

The analysis of the school documents will be carried out using conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis is a form of content analysis with the aim to determine the presence of words or concepts in a text in this case the documents related to the transition from school to work of learners with learning difficulties. The aim of conceptual analysis is to attain a condensed description of a phenomenon (Elo and Kyngäs 2007). In this research the aim will be to gain insight into the way the position of learners is described in school documents. Fairclough (2009) and Montesano Montessori et al. (2012) indicate that the use of language in documents can be an important indicator of the division of power which in this case has a relationship with who makes the decisions in the transition from school to work. The analysis of the school documents is intended to determine if and how the policies described in the documents enhance the participation of learners in decisions about their future. Participation of learners in transition planning is a crucial factor for success (Webb et al. 2014). The data will be analysed in relationship with the five levels of participation as developed by Shier (2001), discussed in 2.2.

### *3.8. Summary.*

Giving learners a voice offers an opportunity to critically reflect on their situation (Fine 1994) and needs to be understood in a context (Scott and Usher 2011). Since this research investigates the views of different groups of participants it is important to use a methodology which offers the opportunity to reflect on all empirical data. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) developed a reflexive interpretive methodology in which reflection of the researcher is seen as a tool to give an interpretation of the views expressed by the participants. This methodology uses abduction as an explanatory model which means that the researcher goes back and forth between data and theory. The learners and parents will be interviewed in focus groups, the teachers and employers in individual interviews. Cohen et al. (2000) point out that focus groups

enhance the involvement and interaction between participants. Data from the employers will be collected using questionnaires while the school documents will be analysed using conceptual analysis which is a type of content analysis. Data analysis will be carried using Applied Thematic Analysis (Guest et al. 2012), which has the advantage that it contains a strong reflexive component (Braun and Clark 2006). This affiliates with the reflexive methodology as proposed by Alevevsson and Sköldberg (2009). The ethical considerations of this research are particularly important because the key participants are learners with learning difficulties. The ethical grid developed by Stutchbury and Fox (2009) will provide a tool to address this issue systematically.

## *Chapter 4.*

### *Critical Reflections on the processes of data collection and analysis.*

#### *4.1. Introduction.*

This chapter presents critical reflections on the processes of data collection and analysis. The research is intended to contribute to an understanding and interpretation of the views of learners with learning difficulties on their position in the transition from school to work in a setting represented by the views of employers, parents, teachers and school policies described in school documents. Understanding and interpreting the view of the learners is seen as part of a process of giving learners a voice. The importance of giving learners with disabilities a voice is pointed out by King et al. (2005) and Lewis (2011) and reflected upon in Chapter 2.

The methodology which was used in this research is based on the reflexive interpretive approach to research as proposed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), explained and reflected upon in chapter 3. The reflexive interpretive approach can be characterised by a constant reflection on every step of the research process. This reflection includes critical contemplation on the interpretation of the empirical material by the researcher but also on the construction of this material. The chapter commences with critical reflections on the process of data collection from the school documents, followed by critical reflections on the focus group interviews with learners and parents and the interviews with teachers and employers. The last section will discuss the process of data analysis.

## *4.2. Process of data collection.*

### *4.2.1 School documents.*

School documents related to the transition phase from school to work were considered to belong to the setting in which the learners expressed their views. In retrospect it needs to be said that the school documents were of limited value for understanding the position of learners in the school. The documents were inconsistent and lacked a clear view which meant that they did not provide a framework which could give direction to the processes and procedures in the school. This was later confirmed by the teachers in their interviews as shown in the quotation below.

*Input of parents and learners needs to be secured in our procedures in such a way that all teachers use the same methods in their dialogue with the parents and learners.*

The assumption that the documents provided a framework meant that the researcher, although part of the management of the school, had less knowledge about the difference between described procedures of the school and the actual practice, than expected. This was also confirmed in the interviews with teachers in a later stage of the research.

The aim of the analysis was to determine how the role of the learners was described in school documents. The gap between described procedures and practice was considered a finding in itself. However, the notion that analysis of the documents could take place by using the levels of participation developed by Shier (2001) was an oversimplification and had to be abandoned. It was decided instead to search for instances in the documents which suggested a role in the decision-making processes and then relate these to the learners. In the preparatory phase of the analysis, several options were considered. The first option was to code for the words parent, teacher and learner but this would help not address the research question because it would not provide

information about how the learners were described. It was therefore decided to use three codes which are shown and defined in Figure 4.1. below. In the first phase of the analysis of the school documents, all instances which contained the word learner or learners were coded. The second step was to determine whether to code for existence or for frequency of a concept. In this research the choice has been made to determine the rate of recurrence in which the different codes appeared in the text. The frequency gave an indication whether there was a general idea about the role of the learners. In this way it was possible to establish a notion about how the learners were described in the documents.

Code	Definition
<b>Learners described in a neutral way.</b>	Learners are mentioned in the text but the subject of the phrases relate to something else. E.g. Teaching assistants will accompany learners to group work-experience training.
<b>Learners in an active role.</b>	Learners are described as active participants in their own development. E.g. Learners will ask their work supervisor for additional support.
<b>Learners in a passive role.</b>	Learners are described in a passive way. E.g. The teacher will introduce the learner at the workplace.

Figure 4.1. Codes used for conceptual analysis of school documents about the transition from school to work.

There were hardly any statements in the documents which directly referred to the role of the learners; most information was indirect and incomplete. In the coding process, concepts were only coded in the original document, when they appeared and were explained for the first time. The documents which describe the transition phase from school to work include a system to determine the level of support learners need at the workplace. This system is repeated in the description of each different phase in which learners receive work experience training and does not provide new information.

The different codes were then related to the levels of participation as developed by Shier (2001). The model was adapted to provide a tool to analyse the level of participation of the learners in this research as presented in the school documents. The adaptations are shown in Figure 4.2. below.

<b>Level 3</b>	Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
<b>Learners views are taken into account.</b>	Is the school ready to take learners' views into account?	Does the decision-making process enables the school to take learners' views into account?	Is it a school policy that learners' views are taken into account?
<b>Level 2</b>	Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
<b>Learners are supported in expressing their views.</b>	Is the school supporting learners in expressing their views?	Does the school have arrangements to help learners to express their views?	Is it a school policy to support learners in expressing their views?
<b>Level 1</b>	Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
<b>Learners are listened to.</b>	Is the school ready to listen to learners?	Does the school work in a way that enables professionals to listen to learners?	Is listening to learners is a school policy?

Figure 4.2. Levels of participation adapted from Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001).

Level 1: Learners are listened to and has three stages which contain the following questions: *Stage one*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that the school is ready to listen to the learners? At this level the only requirement is that learners are listened to when they express a view. *Stage two*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that the school works in a way which enables teachers and other staff to listen to the learners? At this level it is a requirement that there is evidence that there are arrangements which enables teachers to listen to the learners. *Stage three*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that listening to learners is a school policy? At this stage it is necessary that listening to the learners is a stated obligation of the school.

Level 2: Learners are supported to express their views. This level has also three stages which were adapted and contain the following questions: *Stage one*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that the school is ready to support the learners in expressing their views? *Stage two*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that the school has an arrangement of ideas and activities to help learners to express their views? *Stage three*; is there evidence in the data from the school documents that it is a policy requirement that learners must be supported in expressing their views? The analysis indicated that the school documents only reached level two stage one of Shier's model which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

#### *4.2.2. Focus group interviews with the learners.*

After analysis of the school documents the research continued with investigating the views of the learners. The learners who participated in the research were all capable of expressing themselves without using additional communication techniques. This was considered a valid reason to conclude that interviews were a realistic technique to gather data. The advantage of using interviews was that they offered the opportunity to exchange views (Cohen et al. 2000). The procedure which was used to collect data from the learners is shown in Figure 4.3.

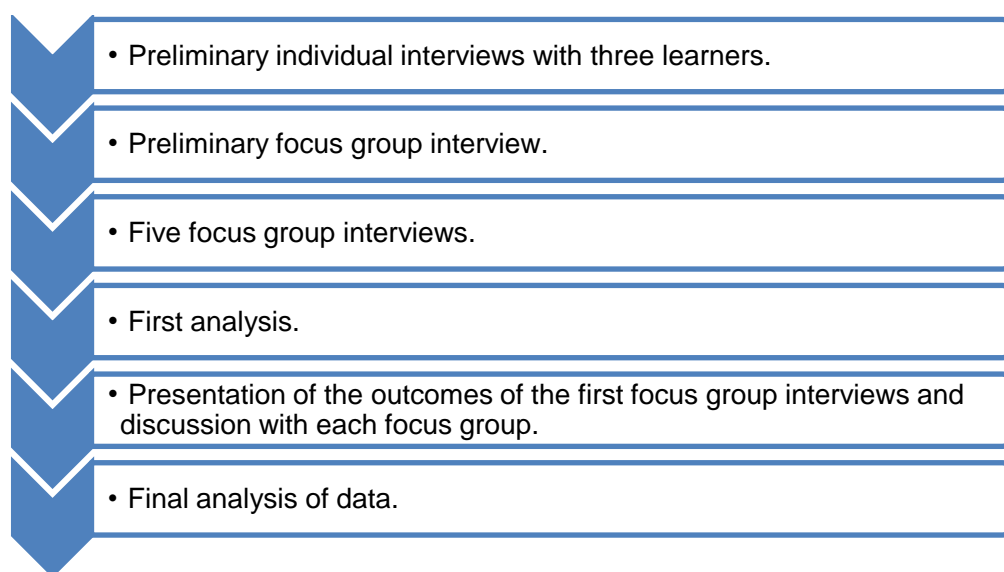


Figure 4.3. Process of focus group interviews with the learners.

In the preparatory phase of the research different techniques were considered to collect data from the learners, which could support in addressing the first research questions. The focus group interviews were preceded by three individual interviews with learners. These interviews gave an indication of the topics, which were important for the learners.

During the interviews the researcher did not only listen to the learners but also tried to register how something was said and included this in the notes which were taken. The importance of ensuring that one has this awareness of how learners express their views is pointed out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said; he or she should be knowledgeable about the interview topic, be observant of-and able to interpret vocalisation, facial expression, and other bodily gestures (p.29).

The way the learners communicated in the individual interviews raised doubts about whether they felt free to express their views. The learners seemed a bit tense and timid and did not respond in their usual way. They seemed to avoid eye contact as well. It was possible that this was caused by for them the unusual situation that they were interviewed. It was also a possibility that it was caused by the fact that the researcher had other roles in the school too.

This seemed to confirm that interviewing children or young people with learning disabilities is a complex process as is pointed out by Cohen et al. (2000), Lewis (1992, 2011) and Lewis and Porter (2004). They indicate that it can be difficult to elicit genuine responses where participants get beyond answers they think are expected from them and that great care needs to be taken to give all participants the possibility to express themselves in a way they find appropriate. When learners were asked clarifying questions like; *what do you mean by that? Or can you explain what you*



*mean?*, they became insecure and sometimes changed what they had said. When they were given a summary of what they had said, the learners immediately agreed with the summary. This could mean that the summaries were very accurate but when some summaries were deliberately inaccurate, learners tended to agree as well so it seemed likely that they were reluctant to disagree. If learners were not expressing themselves freely, this could influence the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the data the learners provided during the interviews. It was concluded that in this situation individual interviews were therefore not the appropriate method to use with these learners. The advantage that interviews offer the possibility to exchange views (Cohen et al. 2000) as mentioned above and in 3.6.1. did also not apply to the interviews with the learners. It was apparent that views expressed by the researcher influenced the way the learners voiced their opinions. The issues which the learners brought forward, such as the way other people perceived their abilities and how people not really listened to them, were valuable but it was obvious that the use of focus group interviews presented better opportunities to elicit the views of the learners, as discussed in 3.6.1. The preliminary focus group interview confirmed this, as the learners were more relaxed and gave the impression that they enjoyed participation.

The preliminary individual and focus group interviews were a crucial phase of the research and assisted the researcher to reflect on his own pre-understandings (Gadamar 2004) of the abilities of the learners. To be able to elicit data which could address the first research question the focus group interviews had to contain questions which helped the learners to reflect on their own situation. This was given much thought and there were some doubts whether the learners had the capability to reflect on their own situation. It turned out that this was an underestimation of their abilities to express themselves and of the level of their thinking, which will be discussed further in the presentation of data in Chapter 5. It became apparent that the learners were able to discuss abstract issues such as the perception other people have of learners with

learning difficulties. This does not mean that researchers do not have to consider the vulnerability of young people with learning difficulties as Walmsley (2001) emphasises. The individual interviews showed that the interests of this group can easily be misrepresented.

It was considered important that the process of data collection was as similar as possible for each focus group. To establish this, the same procedure was used for each focus group. The procedures were adapted from Ponte (2012) and implemented after the preliminary focus group interview.

1. Questions were prepared by the researcher based on a discussion with a preliminary focus group and the individual interviews. The interviewer tried to pose questions in a neutral way to avoid any judgement about the answers.

In the first analysis of the focus group interviews it became apparent that judgements about answers were avoided but this did not mean that the researcher was completely neutral in the interviews. Analysis of the transcribed focus group interviews showed that the researcher was more likely to encourage the learners to elaborate when issues, which were discussed by the learners, were considered interesting for the research, such as their views on disability and impairment. In this sense, it should be noted, that the researcher might have unwittingly influenced the discussions.

2. Each focus group interview started with an explanation of the ground rules for the discussions; each member of the group had the opportunity to express his or her view. All viewpoints were acceptable and although group members could disagree with each other each person was entitled to share his/her own opinion. Participants could ask each other questions when something was not clear but also without judgement.

3. The researcher took the role as facilitator and ensured that every learner had an equal opportunity to express him/herself and made sure that the discussions did not drift away from the topic.

There were moments in every focus group when the researcher had to remind the learners about the ground rules. It was difficult for some learners not to judge the answers others gave, although this was not a major problem. Not all learners contributed in the same way to the discussions, some made more input than others. However, all learners showed a willingness to share their views and to listen to each other which is an important requirement for successful focus group discussions (Kaehne and O'Connel 2010).

4. The researcher made notes and recorded the discussion for analysis. At the end of a topic, learners were asked to summarise the most important points in the discussion. After this summary by the learners, the researcher gave a summary of what had been said based on his notes.

The learners were not really able to summarise the discussion which could have been foreseen by the researcher. That this was included in the procedures was probably caused by too much focus on finding ways to control the process of the interviews. However, the learners listed some of the issues, which were discussed together with a summary by the researcher, which seemed like a satisfactory conclusion to the focus group interview.

5. After first analysis by the researcher the information was presented to the learners and discussed again.

The second focus group session with each group was used to discuss the main topics again. This presentation to the group of data after the first analysis is part of reflection on data collection as described by O'Connor (2007). It gave the participants the possibility to reflect on the outcomes of the interviews and they could add information

or clarify what they said whenever they felt necessary. The discussions suggested that the learners seemed to be consistent in their views. It is possible that this was influenced by the fact that the researcher summarised what they had said in the previous focus group interview and used this for the discussion, however, to discuss the issues again without acknowledging what they had said before was considered unethical. It would have meant that the learners were not treated in the same way as people without learning difficulties. The second focus group interview was of significant value since it helped to identify the most important themes.

The discussion above and the summary of the process as presented in Figure 4.3., shows that the learners had some influence on the research process. Watson (2012) proposes an approach which changes the role of children or people with disabilities from objects into subjects and ultimately into active agents in research. In this research it cannot be maintained that the participants became active agents in the sense that the research was set up as their research. The learners were not involved in the whole research process but they had some influence on the process since they were involved in the preparation of the focus group interviews through preliminary individual interviews and a focus group interview.

#### *4.2.3. The focus group interview with parents.*

The topics for the focus group interview with parents came partly from the preliminary focus group interview with learners. Parents were interviewed in a focus group to enhance discussion about the topics. The focus group was not a representative sample of the school's population of parents. The parents were selected because they were known for their involvement in the school. The parents were members of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) of the school or the parents' council which meant that knowledge about parent rights and the new education act was present in the focus group. Four of the five parents also had children who participated in this research.

Before the beginning of the focus group interview, the purpose of the research was explained. It became apparent that the parents had read the information about the research in school's monthly bulletin, which meant they knew about the main features of the research. The different roles of the researcher as member of the school management, chairperson of the Individual Needs Committee and researcher were discussed to avoid confusion about how information would be used. All parents were aware that the focus group interview took place as part of a research into the views of learners on their transition from school to work. Their consent to participate was recorded.

In the preparatory phase of the research, it was a conscious decision to ask parents from the PTA and parents' council to participate. The motivation was that these parents had more or less the same knowledge about school policies and about legislation regarding the transition from school to work. This was considered important because it could probably avoid discussions about interpretations of policies and legislation. Another consideration was that parents from the PTA had regular meetings with other parents and had the potential to offer views which represented views of other parents. Both reasons were retrospectively not relevant. Policies and legislation only had a minor role in the focus group discussions and parents were not asked to represent others, they were asked about their own views. An advantage was that the parents knew each other which made the interactions fluent and helped to diminish the role of the researcher in the discussions. This last point was considered important in order to minimise influence of the researcher on the discussions between parents. The dialogues between parents were lively and parents were interested in the topic. At the same time, parents wanted to involve the researcher into their conversation and sometimes they asked about information as shown in the example below;

*At what age of the learner do they actually start to use this transition planning?*

But parents were also interested in views of the researcher about topics which were discussed and asked questions like;

*Which learners are eligible for employment in your view?*

Questions for information which contributed to the discussions were answered in one or two sentences. To meet the wish of the parents, that the researcher would share some of his views, it was agreed upon to have an informal discussion after the focus group interview was formally ended. Information of this discussion was not recorded nor used in the research. The reason for this adaptation was that it would assist to collect more accurate data from them without influence of views of the researcher.

#### *4.2.4. Process of collecting data from teachers.*

Teachers' views were investigated by using individual semi-structured interviews. The teachers who participated in the research knew the researcher in the role as member of the school management and chairperson of the Individual Needs Committee. Before the start of the interview it was explained that the interviews took place as part of the research and that all information would be used strictly confidentially and would appear in the research paper in an anonymous way. Everything which was said in the interviews would be used only for the research. It was also pointed out that in this situation the teachers were asked about their personal views on the transition from school to work of learners with learning difficulties. In the interviews the researcher used "deliberate naiveté" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p.30), to prompt teachers to give their views. It meant that the researcher tried to bracket out presuppositions and knowledge about earlier conversations with teachers but also about the school practice. This assisted in eliciting the views of the teachers and connects with Gadamar (2004) who points out the importance of attempting to bracket out pre-understandings. An example of a situation in which this yielded valuable information was the discrepancy between school documents and practice. The researcher presumed that

the school documents provided a framework for transition planning. When the teachers were asked to explain the framework, they specified that the school documents did not provide a framework at all.

The semi-structured interviews with the teachers started with the topic of the difference between impairment and disability. In four of the six interviews this issue was not really explored since it was a topic the teachers did not consider relevant. It was an assumption of the researcher that this issue would be part of the life world of the teachers. Roulston (2010), discusses this problem of questions or interview topics which include assumptions, and indicates that interviewers need to be aware that interviewees might refuse or evade answering such questions. In this research most teachers used the questions about the issue of impairment and disability to initiate different topics. Reflection during the process of the interviews indicated that the teachers felt more comfortable when they could talk about their teaching practice. They considered the issues of differences between impairment, disability and different perspectives on disability such as the difference between the individual psycho-medical model and social models an academic discussion. These parts of the interviews were characterised by long silences and many encouragements of the researcher. It was decided not to pursue this topic. Further exploration of this issue could possibly enhance the unequal power balance which is present in any interview situation (Cohen et al. 2000 and Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) and might also make teachers feel scrutinised. Roulston points out that answers to questions which contain assumptions do not have to be disregarded. The responses of the teachers on this topic were in themselves also valuable information.

It cannot be ignored that power relations might have played a role in the answers of the teachers. Teachers knew about the opinions of the researcher and this might have wittingly or unwittingly influenced the way they expressed their views but this seemed unavoidable. The interviews were ended by giving a summary of the main topics based

on the notes of the researcher. Teachers were asked about their experiences of the interview and they all repeated that they had felt free to express their views. .

#### *4.2.5. Data collection from employers.*

The employers were an important source of information to understand the setting in which the learners expressed their views. In the Dutch context the employment rate of learners with learning disabilities is low (UWV & SBB 2013), for this reason the choice was made to collect data from employers with limited knowledge about these learners and ask them about their perceptions. The first method to collect data from employers failed, as will be explained below. The data from the interviews made it possible to relate the views of employers to what learners specified about the views of other people.

In the preparatory phase of the research, the choice was made to use questionnaires to collect data from employers. Each questionnaire consisted of ten open ended questions and a letter which contained an explanation of the reasons for approaching the employers for information and the confidentiality of the provided information. It was explained that information could not be traced back to individual employers. The two research questions were incorporated in the ten questions with an emphasis on the first research question.

Each employer received an envelope with return address for which postage was paid. The response to the request for information was disappointing since none of the questionnaires was returned. To be able to make a decision about what would be the next step to obtain information from the employers it was necessary to reflect on the use of questionnaires again. Five employers who had received a questionnaire were approached by telephone and asked if they were willing to give feedback on the questionnaire. All employers replied that they found the topic of the questionnaire interesting but they did not find time to reply. This seemed to confirm what Cohen et al.



(2000) say about the use of open-ended questions, people find it often too time consuming to fill in such questionnaires. Four of the five employers said that they had just filled in a survey about the same topic for another researcher which indicated that the timing of approaching the employers was also unfortunate.

Since the information from employers was considered an essential part of the setting in which learners expressed their views, it was still necessary to obtain information from employers in another way. Semi-structured interviews with employers from different types of businesses and a representative from the regional department of the confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) provided were set up. The representative of VNO-NCW was approached for an interview with the intention to obtain information about the views of employers from a broader perspective. This was not successful in the sense that this person mainly answered the questions from the perspective of his role as employer and hardly included views which provided information about views and policies of the organisation. In this sense he was considered the fourth employer.

Each interview started with an explanation about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the information which would be provided by the employer. Consent that information could be used was recorded. All employers were willing to participate when the purpose of the research was made clear. To bring about a situation in which the employers felt comfortable they were asked to explain something about the company first. In the preparatory phase, the researcher had acquired some information about each company which was appreciated by the employers. The preliminary conversation was deliberately short, interviews took place in a relaxed atmosphere and there were no signs that the employers thought the interview took too much of their time. This was considered a risk because the employers who were asked to give feedback on the questionnaires often mentioned lack of time as an important aspect. After the formal ending of the interview all employers wanted to ask some questions

themselves about the organisation of the school and the research. This suggested that their answers were probably not influenced by feelings that the interview took too long.

The interaction in the interviews showed that the employers were content to give their views on the employment of learners with learning difficulties but that they had only limited knowledge about these learners. This was anticipated since it was a conscious decision to interview employers with no or little experience with the learners. The majority of employers in the Netherlands has no experience with learners with learning difficulties given the low employment rate of these learners. For this reason it was considered important to elicit the views of these employers. Collecting data from employers with and employers without experience with the learners was considered a topic for more large scale research which needed a different approach. The data from the focus group interviews with learners and parents indicated that one of the problems they identified was that learners with learners difficulties are categorised based on general perceptions of their abilities. This meant that the generalisations of the employers did not have to be disregarded since they related to, and partly confirmed other findings of the research. The fact that the employers used mainly general assumptions about the abilities of learners with learning difficulties sometimes had consequences for understanding the meaning of what was said. This prompted clarifying questions from the researcher to establish an understanding of what the employer meant. An example of this was found in the use of the concept of difference by one of the employers. He used difference in relation to employees' different skills in his company while the researcher understood it primarily as difference as part of human diversity a concept used by Reindal (2008). The interviews provided useful data which could be related to the data from the other participants and literature.

#### *4.3. The process of data analysis.*

The analysis of the collected data was carried out by using thematic analysis, as discussed in Chapter 3. The focus group and individual interviews were all recorded.

The individual interviews were transcribed while the focus group interviews were partly transcribed. The notes made during the interviews gave direction to this process which was carried out for each focus group interview. After this preliminary stage of preparing the focus group interviews for analysis the procedures for further analysis were the same for the focus group interviews and the individual interviews.

The first part in the analysis of the data from the focus group interviews with learners was a process of meaning condensation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In this process the main sense of what has been said by the interviewees was rephrased in short coherent sentences. An example of this process can be found in Appendix 3. In the process of meaning condensation long statements, which are called the natural units, are compressed into a few words, which is called the central theme and reflects the meaning of what was said. These central themes are unique and only refer to the instance which they are used for. After the process of meaning condensation the complex text of each focus group interview was comprised into a text with short sentences such as;

*Other people think we are different.*

*Learners from other schools think we cannot read and write.*

*People say that we are stupid.*

*We are all different.*

This extensive list of short sentences was then used for further analysis, searching for initial codes and patterns as part of the process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006, Guest et al. 2012). In this process of coding the first three instances were coded as Perceptions of other people while the last one was considered to belong to the code Human diversity. Each code was defined to distinguish the code from other codes. The following example shows how this was done.

<b>Code:</b>	<b><i>Perception of other people.</i></b>	
<b>Definition:</b>	Way other people think about learners with learning difficulties. (In the view of the learners).	
<b>When to use:</b>	For instances where learners indicate what other people say or think about them and where learners indicate that people treat them based on these perceptions.	Example: Other people think we cannot work independently. People treat us as if we cannot do our work without help.
<b>When not to use:</b>	For instances which refer to human diversity.	Example: Other people think we are different.

Figure 4.4. Example of a code.

The process of defining codes was difficult, time consuming and sometimes confusing (Guest et al. 2010). The focus on finding the right definition for a code and avoiding ambiguity as much as possible, was at the same time, necessary to find meaning and relationships in the data. During this process, definitions of codes had to be adapted, codes were abandoned and other codes were added. At first there were far too many codes which made it difficult to establish relationships. This problem was addressed by being more precise and critical about the definitions and use of the codes. It appeared that some codes were nearly identical and could be merged into one code. This reduced the number of codes which made it possible to establish initial themes. After a process of defining and redefining themes the final themes were established. These themes were used for further analysis with the aim to address the research questions. Figure 4.5. provides an overview of different codes and final themes. The final themes were used to create a thematic map which is shown in section 5.1.1.

Final codes. (For the readability this scheme only provides the title of the code not the full definition.)	Final themes.	Relevance for research questions.
<b>Focus group interviews with learners.</b>		

<b>Perceptions of other people.</b> <b>Impairment and/or disability.</b> <b>Human diversity.</b> <b>Concept of disability.</b> <b>Consequences of the perception of others.</b> <b>Talk about how they see themselves.</b>	<i>Personal identity and disability (central theme).</i>	High relevance. This theme connects with the other themes.
<b>Support in relation to employment.</b> <b>Support in relation to work-experience training.</b> <b>Amount of support.</b> <b>Organisation of support.</b>	<i>Support</i>	Relevant
<b>Communication skills of learners.</b> <b>How other people listen to them.</b> <b>Role of teachers in listening to them.</b> <b>Understanding other people.</b>	<i>Communication</i>	Relevant
<b>Practical skills.</b> <b>General education content.</b> <b>How they are treated in the school.</b> <b>Special education and stigmatising effects.</b>	<i>Education</i>	Relevant
<b>Employment.</b> <b>Work.</b> <b>Day-care.</b> <b>Work-experience training</b>	<i>Employment</i>	Relevant
<b>Statements about political issues.</b>	<i>Politics</i>	Not relevant. There were only few instances which could be coded and learners used phrases which seemed to repeat the rhetoric used in television programs. Statements had no connection with transition.
<b>Living on your own.</b> <b>Other activities after school period.</b>	<i>Living on your own</i>	Interesting topic but had no connections with research questions. There was some relevance with

transition from a broader perspective.

#### Focus group interview with parents.

Perceptions of others.  
Perceptions of parents.  
Perception of their children.

*Perceptions of disability  
(central theme)*

High relevance this theme connects with the other themes.

Support and employment.  
Support in general.

*Support*

Relevant

Education.  
Choice for education.  
Practical skills oriented education.

*Education*

Relevant

Employment.  
Day-care.  
Work

*Employment*

Relevant

Protection against making mistakes.  
Involvement in decisions.

*Protection*

Some relevance.

#### Interviews with teachers.

Listening.  
Decisions.  
Participation in decisions.

*Dialogue with learners  
(central theme)*

High Relevance this theme connects with the other themes.

Practical skills improvement.  
Branch certificates.  
Practical skills oriented education.

*Preparation for employment*

Relevant

Employment.  
Work.  
Employment opportunities

*Employment*

Relevant

Involvement of employers.  
Knowledge of employers.  
Perceptions of employers

*Cooperation with employers*

Relevant

Procedures

*Procedures*

No relevance. In these instances teachers merely described procedures in the school

<b>Interviews with employers.</b>		
<b>Abilities of learners. Dependence. Consequences for company.</b>	<i>Perception of learners with learning difficulties (central theme)</i>	High relevance this theme connected with the other themes.
<b>Need for support. Training. Abilities of other employers.</b>	<i>Support</i>	Relevant
<b>Subsidised jobs. Government policies. Economic crisis.</b>	<i>Economic factors</i>	Relevant
<b>Corporate social responsibility.</b>	<i>Corporate social responsibility</i>	Some relevance.

Figure 4.5. Overview of codes and themes.

In the analysis of the data from the focus group and individual interviews, themes were identified for the story they told and how they fitted into the overall story about the relationship between data and research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). A theme was not necessarily a theme because it reoccurred repeatedly although Guest et al. (2012) point out that this can be a reason as well. The main reason for selecting a theme as a theme was whether it contributed to understanding the view of the learners, parents, teachers or employers. However, in a few instances a theme became a theme because it reoccurred several times such as *Living On Your Own*. This theme provided information about how learners saw transition in a broader perspective (King et al. 2005) discussed in 2.5. but did not assist to address the research questions. The interpretation of the different themes which derived from the data was compared with theoretical points of view such as the individual psycho-medical views of disability as criticised and discussed by Danforth (2008), the social model of disability as developed by Oliver (1996) and the capability perspective on disability (Terzi 2010). This comparison suggested a relationship between the views of the learners with a capability perspective on disability which will be discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

The process of data collection provided data which were considered an interpretation of an interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). In this sense the reflexive methodology used in this research provided a valid framework for interpretation and reflection both in the process of data collection and data analysis. The use of abduction as an explanatory model was helpful to find a coherent explanation for some of the different aspects of the views of the learners. The codes and themes were related to theories and possible explanations for why the participants expressed a specific view.

The data from the focus group provided codes such as Human Diversity and Perception of Other People. The codes were related to literature in which these concepts were discussed.. There were indications that there was a connection with identity issues which finally developed into the central theme *Personal Identity and Disability*. This was then related to theory again to establish an understanding. This process was repeated for all themes.

#### *4.4. Summary.*

This chapter presented a critical reflection on aspects of the process of data collection and analysis. This reflection was part of the Reflexive Interpretive Approach as developed by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) which was the methodology used for this research. The first section presented a discussion about the lack of consistency in the school documents and the difficulties to establish a framework for analysis. This was followed by critical reflections on the process of data collection from the learners. Individual interviews proved not to be the most appropriate way to collect data from the learners, focus group interviews provided a better alternative. The researcher sometimes misjudged the abilities of the learners. Their ability to reflect on their own situation was underestimated for example and the procedures which were used were not unproblematic. The reasons for choosing parents from the PTA and parents' council were in retrospect not relevant since the parents were asked about their personal views and to represent others. Parents were interested in the views of the



researcher which was a topic which needed to be addressed to avoid influence of the researcher on the answers of the parents. The first attempt to collect data from employers failed since the questionnaires were not returned. The employers indicated that a lack of time was the main reason not to respond. Individual interviews provided an alternative. The researcher took care to avoid that time pressure from the side of the employers would influence the participation of the employers. The last section of this chapter provided critical reflections on the process of data analysis. It contains a discussion about the use of meaning condensation and thematic analysis and presents a diagram which shows the main codes and themes. The next chapter will present the data which were derived from the focus group interviews, individual interviews and analysis of the school documents.

## *Chapter 5.*

### *Presentation of data.*

#### *5.1. Introduction.*

The process of data collection, analysis of the data and presentation of the findings in this research is based on a reflexive interpretive approach towards research (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009), as discussed in Chapter 3. Using this approach, the researcher needs to be aware of the differences in perspective between him or herself and participants in the research. Authors like Arendt (1978, 1993, 2003), Gadamar (2004), Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) and Scott and Usher (2011) accentuate the importance of this awareness. This research explored the views of learners with learning difficulties, their parents, their teachers and employers on the transition from school to work.

The methods of data collection and analysis used in this research provided three datasets. The chapter starts with the presentation of the first dataset, the data from the focus group interviews with nineteen learners. The second dataset consists of the results of the collection of data from a focus group with five parents and from interviews with six teachers and interviews with three employers and a representative of an employer's organisation. The third dataset contains the data from the school documents relating to the transition from school to work. Analysis of the data revealed that both in dataset one and two the perception of disability were an important issue. In dataset one the personal identity of the learners, which is the identity they have chosen for themselves, was associated with their perception of disability. Dataset two encompasses the views of parents who shared some of the ideas of their children but also have their own perceptions of disability while the views of teachers and employers reflect more detached perceptions of disability.

The quotations from the focus group and other interviews used in this chapter are rephrased from the original natural units using meaning condensation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In this approach the statements of the interviewees are compressed into the main sense of what was said as understood by the researcher. This procedure was discussed more fully in Chapter 3.6. and Chapter 4.2. After the process of meaning condensation the statements were translated into English from Dutch. This process of translating the statements was carried out meticulously since it was very important that the translations represented the views of the interviewees. Temple and Young (2004) point out that translation will always cause dilemmas since it might be difficult to find translations which represent the nuance of a word. The translation of a concept might be difficult or even impossible since the same concept has a different meaning in another language. An example is the concept disability which has no equivalent in the Dutch language which covers its complete meaning.

#### *5.1.1. Overview of the themes in the different datasets.*

The two research questions which informed the focus group interviews with learners were intended to direct the research into the views of the learners. The presentation of the data focuses on the views of the learners about the interrelationship between the themes *Personal Identity and Disability*, *Education*, *Employment*, *Communication*, and *Support* as shown in Figure 5.1.

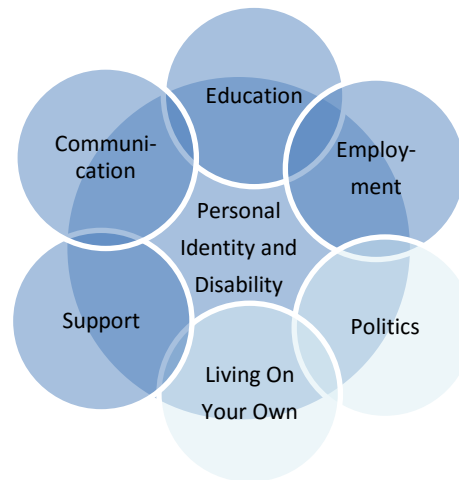


Figure. 5.1 Themes derived from the data of the focus group interviews with nineteen learners.

The themes *Living on Your Own* and *Politics* had some relationship with the theme *Personal Identity and Disability* but not with the research questions as explained in Chapter 4. The theme *Living On Your Own* contains data which were related to forms of assisted living while the theme *Politics* contains data which represented general political opinions of the learners. The themes are mentioned here to give a broad overview of the themes which were derived from the data collected from the focus group interviews. The major issue in the first dataset was the personal identity of the learners and disability. It showed how learners saw themselves but also how they reflected on the perception other people had of them in relation to their disability.

For dataset two the same process of thematic analysis was used to determine themes which provided insight into the views of parents, teachers and employers on the position of learners in the transition from school to work. The data which were derived from a focus group interview with five parents was divided into five main themes: *Perceptions of Disability, Employment, Support, Education and Protection*. Figure 5.2. presents the relationship between the different themes. The research question which

guided the part of the research aimed to elicit views from parents provided information about the setting in which the learners expressed themselves.

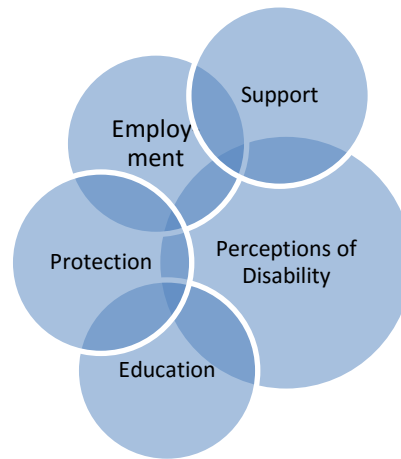


Figure 5.2. Themes derived from the data of the focus group interview with five parents.

The issue of perceptions of disability as identified by the parents related to the main issue of dataset one; the relationship between personal identity and disability as experienced by the learners. There were more connections between the data from the focus group interviews with parents and learners as shown in Figure 5.1. and Figure 5.2. above and discussed below in section 5.2. The learners and parents expressed their views on employment of learners with learning disabilities, the support they needed and the role of education in relation to both.

The data from the interviews with six teachers, showed a more detached view on the perception of disability. The teachers saw the difference between impairment and disability as an academic debate with little influence on their everyday practice in which they wanted to prepare the learners for work, an issue which will be discussed further in Chapter 6. They realised that the perceptions employers have of learners with learning difficulties had the potential to influence the chances of the learners with regard to employment. The analysis of the data revealed five main themes; *Dialogue*

*with Learners, Preparation for Employment, Cooperation with Employers, Employment and Procedures.* The theme *Procedures* was connected with the data from the documentary analysis and will be discussed in 5.3. *Dialogue With Learners* emerged from the data as an important aspect of the views of the teachers on the transition from school to work. The other themes associated with this main theme are shown in Figure 5.3.

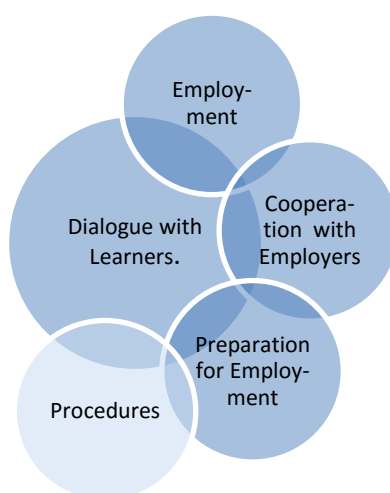


Figure 5.3. Themes derived from the interviews with six teachers.

The interviews with three employers and a representative of the regional department of the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) provided data which could be divided into four main themes; *Economic Factors, Support, Perception of Learners with Learning Disabilities* and *Corporate Social Responsibility*. The data derived from the interviews were considered as one category of data without making a distinction between employers and the representative of the VNO-NCW as discussed in Chapter 4. The two research questions which provided guidance for this part of the research intended to provide information about the views of employers on competencies of the learners related to employment. The different themes were interrelated as presented in Figure 5.4. in which the perception the participating

employers had of learners with learning difficulties became the main theme which had connections with the three other themes.

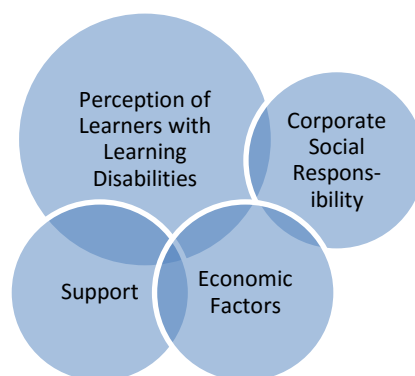


Figure 5.4. Themes derived from the data of the interviews with employers.

Most of the data coded into the other themes could be related to this main theme. The data showed that learners with learning difficulties were seen as a group with common characteristics and not as individuals. This can be seen to have the potential to form a barrier for successful employment as pointed out by Winn and Hay (2009).

It is recognised that it requires more than just schools to facilitate a positive transition but also employers to reconceptualise the notion of disability to one of individuals with ability and the contribution all people can make to the workplace (Winn and Hay 2009, p.103).

The views employers had about the need for support for learners with learning disabilities, coded as the theme *Support*, were based on the way they see learners with learning difficulties. The economic factors, which were discussed and coded as the theme *Economic Factors* also had a relationship with the perception employers had of learners with learning difficulties. The same applied to the theme *Corporate Social Responsibility* since the data from both themes showed that learners with learning difficulties were seen as a group with common characteristics.

The data from the conceptual analysis of school documents formed dataset three and provided answers to the research question;

- How is the position of learners with learning disabilities described in school documents about the procedures in the transition phase from school to work?

The data showed that the segments in which the words learner or learners appeared could be divided into three different categories. Learners were described with a neutral role, a passive role or in an active role as shown in Figure 5.5.

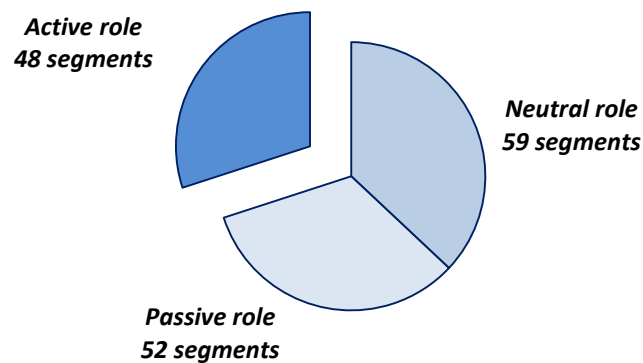


Figure 5.5. Ways learners were described in school documents.

Buntinx and Schalock (2010) point out that a learner needs to be “an active determiner of his or her own development” (p.288). The data showed that only in forty-eight segments related to the transition from school to work the role of the learners was described in a way which could be seen as an attempt to present or enhance their role as active determiner of their own future.



## *5.2. Major Issues which arose from the different datasets.*

### *5.2.1. Perception of disability and identity.*

Analysis of the data from dataset one indicated that learners saw themselves as individuals with individual opinions but that they sought support for their opinions. They formulated their views often, but not always, after discussion in which they reached agreement on a collective view. The use of “we” in the quotations in this section reflects their collective views. (When quotations from interviews are used in the text of this thesis they will be written in italics and indented in the text).

The data suggested that learners made a clear distinction between their impairment and disability.

*We have difficulties with learning, we are not disabled.*

They were conscious of their impairments and defined themselves as young people with learning difficulties. The learners were aware that their impairment caused restrictions or “impairment effects” (Terzi 2010, p.98).

*We are less able in some areas.*

*It is not easy to have a difficulty with learning.*

*We have a disadvantage in learning.*

In the view of the learners these impairment effects were not identical to being a person with a disability. The difference made by the learners suggested that their views related to the distinction between impairment and disability as pointed out by Thomas (1999, 2004), Sen (1999), Terzi (2004, 2005a, 2005b) and Reindal (2008). An impairment can have an effect on activities and cause “reduced functioning” (Reindal 2008 p.139) which the learners partly explained as;

*Being less able in some areas.*

But this reduced functioning does not constitute disability. The learners saw their learning difficulties as part of human diversity and not as a characteristic which made them different from other people.

*We are not different from other people because of our learning problem.*

*Everybody is normal, all people are different.*

The learners experienced that other people did not share their views. The issue of the contrast in the perception other people had of learners with learning difficulties and the way learners saw themselves was found across most of the different themes which were identified in the data.

#### *5.2.2. The perception other people have of disabilities.*

The data from the interviews with five parents showed comparable results. Four of the five parents expressed the view that there is a discrepancy between the self-image of learners and the perception other people have of learners with learning difficulties. These parents indicated that their child was aware of his or her impairment in learning but did not consider him or herself disabled.

*My son came home from football training, he told in shock that one of the trainers of the team had said that he was disabled and that, for this reason, the other team members needed to treat him in a different way, this astonished him.*

In this view disability was more a problem created by others and not part of the self-image of their child. One parent saw disability only as a factor within her child and not created by the environment or society. On the other hand she also agreed that society created barriers which influenced the opportunities of learners with learning disabilities. Parents explained that they had gone through a process of understanding the impairment of their children. They stated that in the past, they might have been, and

occasionally maybe still are, a disabling factor for their child so in contrast with the teachers they reflected on their own role.

*Most learners seem to accept their impairment. As parents we had or have a problem to understand this impairment. We sometimes enhance the impairment and it can become a disabling factor.*

The data from the focus group interview with parents underpinned the complexity of the process of understanding impairment and disability. This complexity of understanding disability is also recognised by authors like Oliver (1996), Terzi (2004), Shakespeare (2006), Reindal (2008), Vehmas (2010) and Watson (2012), as discussed in Chapter 2.

All parents agreed that society created barriers for learners with learning difficulties based on a general perception of the learners, as a group with special needs, who might need “special instruction, procedures that are out of the ordinary” (Vehmas 2010, p.92). Parents indicated that, in their view, learners with learning disabilities are not recognised as valuable and equal members of society.

*Society denies the existence of people with disabilities.*

*Society is too demanding, there is no place for people with impairments.*

This distinction, between who is seen as valuable for society and who is not, relates to Vehmas (2010) who reflects upon social justice related to special needs which will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

The learners saw a relationship between their need for support and negative perceptions of their abilities. The learners indicated that they needed support but that this was not a reason to consider them different from other people. Support will be discussed further in relation to employment in the section about employment and support below.

*We are not different; other people also need support sometimes.*

In the view of the learners their problems with learning were part of human diversity in which support is not a need reserved only for people with learning problems.

The parents indicated that they saw a discrepancy between the self-image of the learners and the perception other people had of learners with learning difficulties. They argued that society creates barriers based on general assumptions which impede the chances of employment for the learners.

### *5.2.3. Learning difficulties and human diversity.*

It can be argued that the view of the learners has features which relate to the capability approach, as discussed by Sen (1999), Terzi (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2010) and Reindal (2009) which places a focus on human heterogeneity and capabilities.

*People should not look at my learning problem, my disability.*

*People should focus on your capabilities.*

According to the learners, the perception other people had of learners with learning difficulties was a disabling factor. In this aspect there was an overlap with the views of the parents. The parents mainly supported the views of their children. They stated that the learners have impairments in learning and that these impairments have effects which can limit their opportunities in society. They also maintained that the limitations of the learners were sometimes problematized by the social environment of the learner, for example by family members but also by society in general. In this sense there seemed to be a connection between the opinions of the parents and the view of Oliver (1996, 2000) who points out that disability is not a result of an impairment but is caused by the reaction of society to this impairment. One of the parents also reflected upon this issue.

*We all have our limitations which cause constraints on what we can do or want with our life, these learners have learning impairments which are problematized by our society.*

It became apparent that the views of the parents demonstrated aspects which had a relationship with the capability perspective on disability as established by Terzi (2010). She emphasises that disability “emerges from the interaction of personal and circumstantial factors, and relates to a limitation of capabilities, or a capability failure” (p.99). Parents indicated that, under positive circumstances and with the right support, learners have the ability to work but that they are often limited by prejudices in society and also by the present economic circumstances which makes employers reluctant to employ them.

One parent suggested that the difference between impairment and disability was a semantic and philosophical discussion which concealed the fact that their children were disabled.

*The word disabled is much clearer, at least you know that there is something wrong, it seems that we have difficulty with the word disability and use impairment because it sounds more friendly less definite.*

For the learners the distinction between impairment and disability was not semantic but a reality in which they saw a link between the perceptions other people had of learners with learning difficulties and the way they were treated. Learners indicated that they felt they were not dealt with in a way they considered suitable, appropriate and related to their age and abilities.

*Sometimes you are treated as a child because you have a learning problem,*

*Sometimes the teachers talk to us as if we are young children. That is not necessary.*

The learners also pointed out that they experienced the same approach of not being treated in a way they considered appropriate when the issue of making decisions about their future was concerned.

*The teacher or our parents will look for a workplace for us but we would prefer to do this ourselves, which would be better for us.*

*We can make our own decisions about our work.*

*Why do they think we cannot make our own decisions?*

The underlying message seemed to be that the learners felt powerless in situations where teachers and parents took decisions about their future. They realised the importance of decisions in this phase of their education and pointed out that they needed support from parents and teachers to make the right decisions but wanted to make the decisions themselves. The view of the learners supports the findings of research carried out by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE] (2002, 2009) and the Styrian Association for Education and Economics [SAEE] (2010) which underpin the importance of the involvement of learners in decisions in the transition from school to work, as discussed in Chapter 2.5. Parents were divided about the issue of involvement of the learners in decisions about their future. All parents thought that the learners were not able to make these decisions in this stage of their lives although they realised this might be a form of overprotecting their child. Migliore et al. (2007) states that families of learners with disabilities often have mixed feelings about employment in the regular labour market and regularly think that they cannot make choices about employment. Three of the five parents thought that learners would never be able to make their own choices and that final decisions regarding employment should be made by parents and school.

*It is important that they are supported to accept their impairment and to see their own strengths and weaknesses but decisions about work need to be taken by school and parents.*

Teachers indicated that, in their view, decisions about the future of learners were made in cooperation between teachers, parents and learners.

*The route towards transition from school to work is decided upon by teachers, parents and learners.*

In the analysis of the data it was noticeable that learners were always mentioned last in relation to decisions about their future. In dataset two there was no evidence that teachers thought learners were not treated in an appropriate way related to their age and abilities but they were divided about the quality of the meetings with the learners relating to their transition from school to work. Three of the six teachers were satisfied with the quality and content of the meetings with the learners and thought that learners were involved in decisions about their future.

*Learners are sufficiently involved in their transition from school to work. Their view is represented in their transition plan.*

*Learners have enough input in their transition plan which is used as guide for their education and work-experience training.*

Two teachers thought that the quality of the meetings with learners was acceptable but they saw opportunities for improvements. In their view the meetings needed to change into a dialogue in which teachers would more act as coach or facilitator for the learners. Morgan and Openshaw (2011) suggest that teachers in such a role support the learners in their transition to employment and mediate between learners and the business community. The teachers also pointed out that learners needed to learn how to participate in decisions about their future. They also wanted that the results of

assessments were discussed with the learners which indicated that these results were currently not discussed with them.

*The meetings with the learners need to be changed into dialogue in which the teacher takes the role of counsellor and should start in an earlier stage of the education of the learners so that they become more experienced in sharing their views before they enter the transition phase.*

*The outcomes of the work related assessment of the learner, which takes place at the beginning of the transition phase, should be discussed with the learners in more detail and used for the transition planning.*

Although the views of teachers about the dialogue with the learners differed, the data indicated that teachers wanted to give the dialogue with learners a central place in the transition from school to work. The need for more dialogue with the learners was also evidenced by the learners who pointed out that they wanted more involvement in decisions about their future. The data from the focus group interviews with the learners showed that learners were critical about how their voices were heard in matters concerning them. This was in contrast with the views of the majority of the teachers who saw opportunities for improvements but were in general satisfied about the meetings with the learners.

One teacher had a different view and pointed out that the school had procedures to arrange meetings with learners and/or parents in which teachers heard what learners had to say, but that learners not really participated in decisions. This teacher questioned the quality of the dialogue with the learners and was not convinced that it could be considered a dialogue. In his view a dialogue meant; sharing views but also sharing power which means that teachers and parents had to give up some of their power to make final decisions.

*Is there enough depth in the discussions with the learners?*



*How well are we really listening to what they want or consider important?*

*Teachers and parents are taking the final decisions in my view.*

This view has a connection with the views on listening to the views of learners discussed by Cairns and Brennan (2005) who point out the importance of being prepared to accept that authority is challenged when listening to learners. It also resonates with the views of Wehmeyer et al. (2009) and Carter et al. (2014) that participation in decision making is essential for successful transition. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Critical remarks about the content of the meetings with learners in the data from the interviews with teachers were also evidenced in the data from the focus group interviews with the learners.

*People do not pay attention very well to what I say, they, including teachers, do not talk with us enough.*

*When I cannot immediately explain what I want, the teachers do not listen anymore. They need to listen more patiently.*

Learners expressed anxieties about their communication skills and felt that at times they had difficulties explaining what they wanted, did not want, needed or did not need. The data from the interviews with parents showed that they also recognised this lack of understanding of their children as a problem. They indicated that this could make their role as a parent a disabling factor for their child because they sometimes presumed that they understood what their child wanted and might make decisions based on wrong assumptions. The data revealed that learners were not only aware of their problems in conveying their message but understood the difficulties this could present to others. This suggested again that they were aware of “impairment effects” (Terzi 2010, p.98), as discussed above in relation to the view of the learners on impairment and disability.

*I cannot always explain very well what I think or want; that is sometimes difficult for others like my parents.*

The interpretation of these observations of the learners was that learners experienced powerlessness and were concerned about whether their voices were heard in this important phase of their life.

#### *5.2.4. Stigmatising effects of special education.*

In the view of the learners the fact that they were attending a special school contributed to the negative association people had with the abilities of learners with learning difficulties. They specified that other people treated them differently when these people knew they were attending a special school.

*We are treated differently because we are attending a special school.*

*Learners from other schools are not nice to us because we are from a special school, they think we are stupid.*

*Other people think we are stupid because we are going to a special school.*

Vehmas (2010) supports the view of the learners when he points out that making a difference between ordinary and special needs enhances the idea that learners who attend special schools are different.

The concept of 'special need' does, however, maintain and strengthen the idea of pupils with special educational needs as deviant (Vehmas 2010, p.91).

At the same time learners were also critical about the content of their current education. In their view the content of their education reflected the negative associations people had with their abilities.

*Why do we not get homework? And why do we have to look at programmes for primary schools? We are a secondary school...it is all very childish.*

In the view of the learners they needed a more practical skills oriented curriculum.

*Practical skills are more important you need that in your work. We need more education like the preparation for the Cleaners' Certificate.*

*Work-experience training is very important because then you will learn the skills which you need in your work.*

The Cleaners' Certificate referred to above is a certificate recognised by branch organisations. Research in the Dutch context by Kamps et al. (2010) confirms that certificates recognised by branch organisations enhance the chances of employment and at the same time gives employers information about the learning ability of the learner, as discussed in Chapter 2.4. The view of the learners that more work-experience training would enhance their chances of employment is also reflected upon in research of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE] (2002, 2009), Ward et al. (2003), Taylor et al. (2004), Winn and Hay (2009), Beyer and Robinson (2009), Crossover (2010 and 2011). These authors all point out the importance of cooperation between schools and employers in the organisation and the content of the work-experience training. It improves the understanding of the abilities of learners with learning difficulties and in this sense increases their chances of employment.

The responses from the teachers in the interviews revealed that their views corresponded with the view of the learners. The teachers had the view that education of learners with learning difficulties, before and within the transition phase, needed some serious improvements. They considered that the learners needed more diverse work-experience training which could improve their chances of employment. The choices for different work-experience places were limited and not diverse enough, which meant that learners were sometimes less motivated because they received work-experience training at a place they had not chosen. In the view of four of the six

teachers the school should engage with more initiatives to find appropriate work-experience places.

*Learners do not have enough opportunities to make a choice between different work-experience places.*

*Teachers need more time to find work-experience places.*

*The school does not take adequate initiatives to find more work-experience places.*

All teachers were positive about the branch certificates which were offered by the school as part of the transition from school to work. Teachers specified that these certificates could improve the position of the learners in three ways; they obtained a recognised certificate, they could improve their work-related skills in a way which was known by employers and it showed employers that learners were trainable in a work-related situation.

The learners pointed out that special education had stigmatising effects. They were also critical about their education and were not convinced that it enhanced their chances of employment. The teachers partly supported them mainly with regard to the need for more practical skills oriented education and work-experience training.

#### *5.2.5. Employment and Support.*

The data coded under this theme showed that the learners preferred work in a regular company rather than work in a day-care facility but work with a day-care statement in a regular company was also considered acceptable. Learners demonstrated that they had an understanding of the differences between work in a day-care facility and employment in the regular labour market.

As mentioned above, learners were aware of possible effects of their learning difficulties on their functioning and pointed out that they sometimes needed support in

the workplace. The learners explained that their experience was that their abilities were sometimes underestimated which resulted in too much or inadequate support.

*Support is necessary when we do not know how the work needs to be done.*

*Support is not always essential; we can do many things on our own.*

In the view of the learners support in the workplace needed to take place in an organised way based on individual needs. They had some clear ideas about how this had to be organised and indicated that support should be targeted at enhancing their independence in the workplace. This also meant that it should be given when they asked for it and not without consultation when other people thought they needed it.

*The work-supervisor will teach you what to do but then you can take responsibility for the job yourself.*

*It is sometimes enough when there is someone at the workplace where you can ask for support or help when you need it.*

They considered it important that support was given by a designated person and not by everyone in the workplace who thought they needed support.

*Your work-supervisor tells you what to do, not everyone in the workplace...we cannot concentrate on the job when too many people are interfering.*

The learners indicated that the work-supervisor needed to be someone who recognised their abilities and treated them according to their age which relates back to the issue of the perception people have of learners with learning difficulties.

*A person who recognises the qualities we possess and does not ask something of us which we cannot do.*

*A work-supervisor who will let me do my job on my own when I know what to do and offers support when I ask for it.*

The learners did not consider support in the workplace something which was only reserved for people with learning difficulties. In their view other people also needed support although they indicated that in their case it might be more important. This was confirmed by the views of parents who considered support in the workplace an important condition for successful employment. In the view of the parents success depended on the person who provided support and not on procedures financial incentives for companies or legal provisions which would oblige companies to employ certain numbers of people with disabilities. The views of learners and parents on support relate to a capability perspective on disability (Sen 1999, Reindal 2008, 2009, 2010, Terzi 2005a, 2005b, 2010) in which support can be seen as a way of addressing limitations on relevant capabilities. Relevant capabilities are capabilities the learners can and want to achieve. Analysis of the data indicated that the learners value employment as an activity they want to pursue. Learners and parents specified that employment is possible, provided that support is organised adequately and based on their individual needs. They are supported by the views of Reindal (2008) who argues that support can address limitations caused by specific impairments. It is possible to address issues which are imposed on top of restrictions based on the learning difficulty of a learner. Learners with learning difficulties can have difficulties with mastering complex tasks which is a limitation based on their impairment. When they get instruction from different people and the whole task is explained at once, this will complicate the task even more. However, when such a task is divided into smaller sub-tasks and given by a designated person this will support them and in this sense assist them to overcome a limitation.

#### *5.2.6. The perception of employers.*

Analysis of the data showed that the employers saw the learners as a group with common characteristics and not as individuals, which confirmed what learners said about the perceptions of other people as discussed above. The dominant opinion of the

employers who participated in the interviews was that learners with learning difficulties could not be seen as valuable employees and that employing learners with learning difficulties was a risk for the company. Employers expected the productivity of learners with learning difficulties to be low. Not only lower compared to employees without learning difficulties but low in the sense that there was little or no added value to the productivity of the company. The productive capacity of learners with learning difficulties was mentioned in all interviews with the employers and was considered an important issue. The employers stated that lowering their standards was not an option. This was considered unfair towards other employees, a disadvantage for the company and would mean that the employee with a disability was not taken seriously. Parents also mentioned productive capacity which they saw as one of the risks which could influence the chances of employment for the learners in a negative way.

*Employment in a regular company could turn into a deception for the learner when the pressure of work is too high, or when learners cannot cope with a certain level of productivity.*

*It seems that regular companies are willing to employ learners with learning difficulties but that concerns about work pace, productivity and flexibility of the learners keeps them from doing so.*

When, in the interviews with the employers, the point was made that in every work situation there are people with higher and lower productivity they agreed to this but argued that employees with lower productivity often had other value for the company.

*In our present situation we also have employees without disabilities with a lower productivity, that is true but they have another added value, more on a social level. One of my employees, for example, knows all the clients and makes conversation with them which is very much appreciated but her working speed is slow.*

This issue of additional value was also mentioned by parents in relation to learners with learning difficulties;

*The learner can have a different role in a company and in such a way have an additional value.*

*Other employees can learn from the social aspect of young people with a disability.*

According to three of the five parents, employers needed to be able to acknowledge the additional value of learners with learning difficulties to improve the learners' employment opportunities. Two parents indicated that it is a positive development that more companies were promoting corporate social involvement and might therefore be less reluctant to employ young people with disabilities. The employers who participated in the interviews specified that if they were to consider employing learners with learning difficulties this would be part of corporate social responsibility. In such a situation, the employment of learners with learning difficulties would have a positive effect on the image of the company. In this sense employers did not consider the learners to be potentially valuable employees who could be employed because they had the right abilities.

Employers were also concerned about independence and presumed need for support of learners with learning difficulties.

*I have some experience with learners with learning difficulties. Every two hours you need to give explanations. It was not a positive experience. Other employees do not always understand everything either but you expect that learners from Senior Secondary Vocational Education (MBO) background have a higher level of understanding and are also less depending on support.*



All four employers stated that learners who needed little or no support had better chances of employment. Independence of the learners was considered an important factor for successful employment and learners with learning difficulties were considered to lack independence.

*Independence of employees is very important. As employers you do not have the time to help the employee, stand next to him or her or organise constant support by somebody else.*

The prevailing opinion of three of the four participating employers was that when learners with learning disabilities became employees they needed almost constant supervision, support or help. Another aspect, mentioned in relation to organising support, was the capacities and willingness of other employees to support colleagues with learning disabilities based on the assumption that this support needs specific skills.

Negative experiences of colleagues confirmed ideas of the employers about the abilities of the learners while there were not many positive examples to contradict this image. They stated that some Dutch television programmes, which claim to enhance understanding of people with learning disabilities, partly confirm an existing negative image. The same example of a person with learning difficulties working in a restaurant was mentioned twice. In this example, shown in a Dutch television programme, the employee with learning difficulties served two customers who had ordered a meal. After he brought the food, he stayed with the customers and kept on talking, which made it impossible for them to start their meal. For the employers this confirmed their idea that people with learning difficulties have difficulties understanding social situations. They considered this as something which would be problematic in their company.

*Offering learners with learning difficulties an employment contract is a difficult matter. What happens when the learner does not fit in the company? Employing*

*people with disabilities is a risk in this economic crisis. Even when they work hard, they might lose interest in what they have to do. It is a high risk for employers.*

A placement based on a day-care statement was seen as a possibility since all costs would be covered and there was less risk for the employer as the employee would not have an employment contract with the company. The data showed that employers also had a lack of trust in the ability of learners with learning difficulties to learn at the workplace and to maintain a positive attitude towards work. This confirmed the findings of Kamps (2010) and the Styrian Association for Education and Economics [SAEE] (2010) who also mention that employers can be concerned about the abilities and motivation of learners with learning disabilities.

The employers were aware of arrangements and subsidies to encourage initiatives to employ young people with disabilities. They considered the use of subsidising schemes as a compensation for lower productivity to have advantages and disadvantages.

*The economic value of the employee with learning difficulties is nil. In such cases it comes to entrepreneurship. I have to pay a salary but the output is zero. Subsidy might help in those cases.*

Two of the four employers considered a grant an advantage, since it offers some compensation for loss of productivity. An opposing view was that subsidising or partly subsidising a workplace had the disadvantage that it made employer and employee dependent on a grant which could be withdrawn by subsidising institutions.

*I think that a workplace should not depend on a subsidy. It means that you are fooling yourself and the employee. When the subsidy is terminated the workplace will probably be lost.*

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education EADSNE (2002, 2009) also found that financial benefits can have positive effects in the short term but when these financial incentives are withdrawn the subsidised workplace might also disappear. To make financial incentives work, the system needs to be flexible and straightforward aiming to create workplaces, which in the long-term can become independent from a grant. All four employers characterised the Dutch system, which provides grants when young people with disabilities are employed, as complicated with different rules for different categories of disabled people. Kamps et al. (2010) also mention the opaque arrangements as a discouraging factor for employing young people with disabilities.

The employers' unfamiliarity with learners with learning difficulties was mentioned as a probable barrier by all teachers. Teachers thought that work-experience places were important in overcoming this barrier. They also reflected on the need for more cooperation with employers as a mean to improve the chances of employment for the learners. This is confirmed by research of the SAE (2010) which also indicates that work-experience places enhance knowledge about learners with learning disabilities. Teachers indicated that the school needed to invest more time in informing employers about the potential of the learners and put more effort into maintaining contacts with employers.

*Employers still have a limited understanding about the capabilities of our learners.*

*School should put more effort in maintaining contacts with employers; the evaluation meetings are not enough we need to be more pro-active.*

Parents had similar views about the cooperation between employers and the school. In the view of the parents cooperation between school and the business community was still underdeveloped and special schools should focus on long term cooperation with

local businesses. This cooperation should in the first place establish more work-experience places for learners and in the second place create more understanding which could lead to more employment possibilities for learners with learning difficulties.

*There is still a lot of work to be done to enhance participation of learners with learning disabilities in employment. This demands support and time from parents too. We could make connections with companies in our social environment because they know us and our child.*

All the teachers expressed the view that employment in the regular labour market is feasible for learners with learning difficulties.

*Employment is a realistic option for some of our learners.*

Teachers had the view that learners with learning difficulties could become valuable employees. Employment was considered a form of social inclusion and all teachers saw it as a right of the learner to be employed. In this aspect their view relates to a capability perspective on disability (Terzi 2010) which evaluates how well people are able 'to be and to do what they value being and doing' (p.3). It is clear that the learners value employment in the sense that they want to be an employee with meaningful work. This also relates to Grant (2008) who indicates that people with disabilities want to become and can be dedicated employees.

The parents who participated in this research agreed that learners had a right to participate in the regular labour market and that their impairment or disability could not be a reason to deny them this access. The parents thought that it was necessary to implement changes in the current legislation before employment of learners with learning difficulties would be possible and successful. In the view of the parents the current regular labour market was not completely ready to employ learners with learning difficulties. Hay and Winn (2005) indicate that many parents of learners with

disabilities are concerned about the adequacy of services which are implemented to enhance employment of people with disabilities.

Teachers specified that the learners themselves were the main factor for successful employment in the sense that their own motivation helped them to overcome barriers.

*G. got his job and still works in the same workplace because he was already so motivated during his work-experience training that the employer saw his possibilities.*

In general teachers were positive about the abilities of the learners related to work and they thought that in the future more learners would gain access to the regular labour market, although this process would probably take considerable time.

### *5.3. The position of the learners as described in school documents.*

As discussed in Chapter 4, the levels of participation developed by Shier (2001) were used as a framework for further analysis of the data since, in the context of this research, participation of the learners was considered a key-factor which determines their position. Participation enhances autonomy, self-determination, and independence (Hart 1992), which are important factors for successful transition (Wehmeyer 2002). As reflected upon in Chapter 4, the analysis of the school documents provided limited information about the position of the learners. The school documents about the transition from school to work were written to provide a description of the school procedures. The preface does not specify for whom the documents are intended but teachers indicated in the interviews that the documents were mostly used for internal purposes.

In fifty-nine instances in the documents the role of the learners was described in a way which was coded as neutral, which meant that the words learner or learners appeared in the text in such a way that learners were only regarded as subjects in the procedures

outlined. A neutral code also meant that the instances did not involve responsibilities or decisions.

*The remaining four levels will be concluded when the learners become sixteen years old.*

*The last two to four years of schooling will be used for education of the learners aimed at transition from school to work or day-care.*

In fifty-two instances learners had a passive role which meant that they were described in such a way that they were not seen to have responsibility for their own learning and were also not involved in evaluation or assessment of their own learning.

*The content of teaching for each learner will be determined by the teacher.*

*The teacher or teaching assistant will take care of the introduction of the learner at the work-experience place, evaluation of the process of work-experience training, assessment of the work related skills and social skills and will record this in the work-experience evaluation form.*

*The assessment will give the school and parents an insight in the development of the learners.*

The instances which were coded as neutral or passive did not provide evidence that the learners are listened to. In only forty-eight instances of the data, learners were described in an active role which meant that learners were described in a way which seemed to indicate that they had influence on their education and were involved in decisions.

*Learners are able to assess whether the quality of their work meets the required standards.*

*Learners will do the required tasks on their own initiative and will ask for support when they need it.*

There was some indication in the data that there is a readiness to listen to learners.

*Part of the assessment of the work-related skills is a meeting with the learner.*

Three teachers indicated in the interviews that the purpose of this meeting was to obtain information from the learners about their experiences; it was not used to discuss the results of the assessment. Two teachers indicated that they used this meeting to obtain information but also to discuss the results of the assessment. This discrepancy was seen as evidence of a lack of clear procedures, which secure the position of the learners. Data from the interviews with the teachers coded under the theme *Procedures* also specified that it was part of the procedures to have regular meetings with the learners.

*Meetings with learners about their transition from school to work are held on a regular basis.*

*It is important to have regular meetings with learners about their transition from school to work since it gives information about what they want and what they need to learn.*

These procedures were not described in school documents as was confirmed by the teachers. The fact that the data showed that the school organises meetings with the learners meant that it has arrangements which enable teachers to listen to learners. This does not mean that there are policies in place which indicate that it is a requirement that learners are listened to (Shier 2001). There was no evidence in dataset three to support that the school has a policy to listen to the learners or that learners are supported to express their views.

Lewis (2010) points out the importance of a 'recursive and reflective approach' (p.99) concerning listening to children with disabilities. Reflectivity should enhance a listening culture and establish valid methods to listen to the learners. There was no evidence in the data that there were procedures or methodologies employed to teach the learners how to participate in the decisions. The learners themselves were also critical about the abilities of the teachers to listen to them and were concerned whether their views are taken into consideration as discussed in section 5.2.

*The teachers do not always listen. Sometimes they think they know what I mean, but they do not.*

The parts of the school documents, where learners are described in a more active role, did not provide a framework in which key-factors for participation in decisions and dialogue with the learners were pointed out. There was some evidence that the learners should be listened to and that the school has arrangements in place to listen to learners but there is no evidence that this is a school policy. The school documents did not provide evidence that learners should be supported in expressing their views, that their views should be taken into account, that they should be involved in decision-making processes or that they should share power and responsibility in decision-making (Shier 2001). This means that an active role for the learners in which they participate in decisions about their future is not enshrined in the school documents.

#### *5.4. Summary.*

The process of data collection and analysis was based on a reflexive interpretive approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009) and provided three datasets. The main dataset contained the view of the learners, the second dataset the views of parents, teachers and employers. The last dataset entailed the results of the analysis of school documents.



The process of analysis of the focus group interviews with learners and parents and individual interviews with teachers and employers provided a central theme. The central theme of the focus group interviews with learners was *Personal Identity and Disability*. The focus group interview with parents produced the central theme; *Perceptions of Disability*, the interviews with teachers elicited; *Dialogue with learners* and the interviews with employers the central theme; *Perception of Learners with Learning Disabilities*. Other themes which emerged from the analysis were related to the central themes.

The learners indicated that learning difficulties were part of their identity related to employment. They made a distinction between impairment and disability in which, in their view, learning difficulties are part of human diversity. They experienced that other people did not make the same distinction and considered them disabled. The point made by the learners is that disability is caused by the views other people have of their abilities. The parents mainly supported the learners in their views. They argued that society creates barriers and does not value learners with learning difficulties. The parents were not always consistent in their views since they expressed doubts about the abilities of the learners to make their own decisions and indicated that they were sometimes over-protective. They also indicated they thought learners could have an additional value as employees which seems to indicate that they do not see them as potential entirely skilled employees. This was in contrast with the views of the learners.

Analysis of the interviews with teachers showed that they saw the difference between impairment and disability as an academic discussion with little connection to their teaching practice. They were divided about whether the school had a practice in which teachers listened adequately to the views of the learners and took these views into consideration. They were also divided about whether learners participated in decisions-making processes and the planning of their transition from school to work. The learners were critical about the how teachers listened to their views. The teachers supported the

learners in their aspirations to become employed. They indicated that they saw the learners as potential employees. The teachers were willing to have more dialogue with the learners but were not aware of the implications of participation in decision-making such as sharing power. They specified that final decisions needed to be taken by parents and teachers.

The learners made a connection between the low expectations other people had of their abilities and the stigmatising effects of the fact that they were attending a special school. At the same time they were also critical about the content of their education. The teachers also indicated that changes were commendable. The teachers were not aware of other important aspects of transition education such as enhancing self-determination, autonomy and independence of the learners and the importance of participation in transition planning.

The views of employers on employing learners with learning difficulties were mainly based on perceptions of the learners as a group with common characteristics. They did not consider the learners to be potential valuable employees and were concerned about their need for continuous and specialised support. If they would consider to employ learners with learning difficulties this would be on the basis of corporate social responsibility.

Analysis of the school documents indicated that the learners were mainly described in a passive way. There was evidence that there is a willingness to listen to learners but was no indication of policies to support learners in expressing their views and taking their views into account.

## *Chapter 6.*

### *Discussion.*

#### *6.1. Introduction.*

This research investigated the views of nineteen learners with learning difficulties on their transition from school to employment. Views of parents, teachers and employers provided a setting which assisted in discussing the views of the learners. The school documents informed about how the role of the learners was described in procedures used in the transition from school to work. In this setting the views of learners, parents and teachers are interrelated which means that these views were, to an extent, developed in a dialogic nature (Maybin 2013). The research questions guided the research to elicit data which could possibly disclose the interrelationship between these different aspects. The setting in which the learners expressed their views is part of the wider context of this research which is located in Dutch society, Dutch education and policies relating to learners with Special Educational Needs. Fine (1994) and Scott and Usher (2011) suggest that any voice is embedded in and influenced by the context in which it is understood. This means that the findings of this research were influenced by the setting and context of the research as will be discussed below.

#### *6.2. Personal identity and perception of the social identity of the learners.*

The data showed that the learners demonstrated a level of understanding of the implications of the label learning disabilities, which enabled them to reflect on the effects of this label on their position in the transition from school to work. Interrogation of the data revealed that the participating learners distanced themselves from an identity which labels them as learners with learning disabilities and made a distinction between the social identity, which in their view is imposed upon them by others, and their personal identity. This was an important finding and assisted in answering the

main research question about the views of the learners on their transition from school to work. The quotations below give an example of how learners made this distinction.

*The people who consider us disabled think we cannot speak for ourselves.*

*They ask my mother to tell what I want while I am there and can speak for myself.*

*I have a learning difficulty that does not mean that I do not have my own opinions.*

The concept of identity is complex with different theoretical views in which a prominent view is that all people have different identities which are difficult to separate (Breakwell 1986, Deaux 1992, Craib 1998). Beart et al. (2005) argue that the distinction between personal and social identity can sometimes be useful since it provides clarity in which personal identity reflects a person's self-definition and personal perceptions while social identity represents the perceptions of other people. The use of the concept identity in this research is based on the participants' own orientation and not on scientifically derived social categories of identities (Anataki et al. 1996). Reicher et al. (2010) suggest that when people discuss their personal identity they view themselves in terms of individual characteristics while social identity is based on general perceptions, and can lead to stigmatisation. The learners and their parents mainly defined the identity of the learners by reference to what they are not, or what they do not want to be, as shown in this quote from the data from the focus group interview with learners.

*We are not disabled.*

McVittie et al. (2008) propose that people with learning disabilities, like other people, have different identities which are meaningful and important to them. They are part of a family, might have friendships and/or participate in sports or leisure activities. The

identity issue, discussed in this research, relates to the identity of the learners in relationship to the transition phase from school to work.

The importance of the distinction between impairment and disability was discussed in Chapter 2.3. where it was pointed out that learning difficulties can be seen as impairments which can become disabilities under influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Shakespeare 2006, Terzi 2010). It became apparent that the position of the learners is partly determined by the fact that other people do not make the distinction between impairment and disability. If the learners are seen as young people with learning disabilities there are far reaching consequences when disability is perceived as a “notion of diversity as abnormality” (Terzi 2005a, p.208). Such a notion overlooks the complexity of impairment and disability and will focus on deficits. Rose (1999) argues that concepts which connect diversity with deficit can lead to low expectations and negative attitudes towards people who are labelled in this way. It is evidenced in the data that the learners experienced that other people do not recognise learning difficulties as part of human diversity and in fact perceive the learners as inferior as shown in a quote from the focus group interviews.

*Other people treat us differently; they think we are not normal, not like them.*

In the view of the learners, the distinction between disability and their impairments or learning difficulties is a salient point in understanding disability. The learners did not deny their impairments related to learning and were aware of the possible restrictions or effects impairments can have on their functioning but they rejected the notion that impairment and disability are interchangeable. This is evidenced in the data when they argued that they have difficulties with learning but that this does not mean that they are disabled. The learners were aware that their learning difficulties have “impairment effects” a concept introduced by Thomas, cited in Shakespeare (2006, p.56). Impairment effects are considered to be limitations within the individual, not caused by

external circumstances or barriers. In the focus group interviews the learners indicated that they experience such limitations because they are less able in areas such as literacy and numeracy, that they sometimes have difficulties with their communication and that they need some support in their workplace. The concepts which supposedly determine what kind of differences can be considered learning difficulties are based on a “within-the-child model” (Terzi 2005b, p.447) and fail to acknowledge difference as a “specific variable” (Reindal 2010, p.3). When difference is understood as a specific variable it is not a “deviance from a normal standard” (p.3). This suggests that difference needs to be assessed in relation to what the learners value and want to achieve. When the learners need support in the workplace, to be able to carry out their work, it is a matter of justice that they get this support as part of equal opportunities for all people in society. In this research, the learners value employment which means that their learning difficulties should, using this argument, be evaluated in relation to employment because individuals have the right to make their own choices about the life they value. The learners consider themselves as potentially capable to work but they are restricted by the perceptions other people have of their learning difficulties.

The data showed that they do not consider themselves to be different from other people because they have learning difficulties.

*We are all normal people but everybody is different.*

This indicates that, in their view, learning difficulties are part of human diversity which relates to a capability perspective on disability as proposed by Terzi (2010), discussed more fully in Chapter 2. They see themselves as potential employees for whom employment and the content of their work are important parts of their personal identity. They are impeded in their capabilities to function in relation to employment because their learning difficulties are turned into learning disabilities by the perceptions other people have of disability. This also relates to the educational arrangements of the

learners since Dutch special education is not constructed from a diversity perspective of disability as will be discussed below in 6.4. The findings related to the social identity of the learners, show that their social identity is still mainly based on a perspective of disability as deviation from the norm, which suggests influence from an individual medical model of disability.

Learners can have different identities but in connection with employment they make a distinction between a personal identity, which they choose for themselves and a social identity, which is imposed upon them. As part of their personal identity they make a distinction between impairments and disability in which, in their view, impairments are part of human diversity.

### *6.3. Social identity of the learners.*

The data showed that the social identity of the learners was constructed from general perceptions of the learners as a group. The learners are seen as similar to each other and different from other categories of people. This mechanism of categorising people is identified by Reicher et al. (2010) and often has negative implications such as exclusion. Savaria et al. (2011) argue that more involvement of young people with learning disabilities in the construction of their social identity can prevent this. They point out that according to Foucault labelling maintains power structures in society because some labels are viewed positively while others lead to negative associations. This is exactly what the learners explained that they experienced, when they indicated that other people turn their learning difficulties into learning disabilities. They are educated in a system in which learning disabilities are seen as a recognisable category based on IQ scores and social functioning. This kind of categorisation of people is based on an idea that it is possible to define levels of normal functioning in which differences are seen as deficits (Manion and Bersani 1987). This can be seen as a view influenced by the psycho-medical model of disability (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2011), discussed in Chapter 2.3.

Buntinx and Schalock (2010) argue that the concept of disability has changed.

The construct of disability has changed from focusing on pathology or a defect within the person to a socio-ecological person-environment fit conception that focuses on understanding human functioning and disability based on the interactions between personal and environmental characteristics (pp.283-284).

Although this might be the case in the debate on disability it does not apply to the position of the learners in this research since it is evidenced in the data that they often experience that their impairments are viewed as personal defects. The data related to the views of the learners and to the views of the other participants, indicate that the learners experienced negative effects of a perceived relationship between disability and defect as part of their social identity.

The problem the learners face is that they experience the stigmatising effects of the label learning disabilities (Beart et al. 2005). The stigmatising effects develop in the process which people use to create an image of another person. Goffman (1990) argues that in any situation where people meet or interact they seek to acquire new information about the other individual but also use information they already possess. This information helps people to define the situation they are in and enables them to know what they can expect from each other. Impressions of the individual are tested and compared with existing assumptions about individuals who are considered to have comparable characteristics. This whole process of establishing an image of the other individual is complicated, multi-dimensional and takes mostly place on a subconscious level. Goffman discusses this process regarding the interactions between individuals in social situations and maintains that the more people interact the better they can establish an understanding of the other person. It seems that this process goes wrong concerning learners with learning difficulties. People with disabilities form a minority group, which means that other people are less likely to interact with them. It can be



argued that a system of segregated schooling prevents interactions between young people with and without learning difficulties even more. This can also be maintained about a situation where young people with learning difficulties are not or less employed. Morris (1991) speaks from her own experience, as a person who became disabled after an accident, when she argues that people with disabilities experience prejudice because of other people's assumptions about them. She experienced that other people did not try to get to know her as an individual but assume they already partly know her, because she belongs to the group of disabled people. Other people attribute both positive and negative characteristics to her based on assumptions. Morris argues that prejudices about people with disabilities are caused by the concept people have of normality. The findings of this research suggest that the learners have had comparable experiences. They have also experienced that other people make assumptions about their abilities because they see them as part of the group learners with disabilities in which disability is understood as an anomaly (Danforth 2008).

...bodily or mental anomaly demonstrated by significantly subnormal functioning in domains such as...general intelligence, psychological or linguistic processes of learning, and social or adaptive behaviours (p.46).

The parents who participated in this research also pointed out that the learners are seen as a group with common characteristics and not as individuals. This leads to a one dimensional and often negative perception of their capabilities. Shakespeare (2006) points out that impairments are individual, multi-dimensional and part of a continuum.

Failure to appreciate the impairment continuum contributes to some of the sterile arguments about the nature of disability. It appears to me that some of those that see disability as a tragedy which should be prevented at all costs are seeing only the most severe end of the continuum. And some of those who

deny that impairments can be problematic, and see disability as just another difference, are seeing only the milder end of the continuum (Shakespeare 2006, p.60).

Morris (1991) points out that some people completely ignore her impairment and the fact that she has additional needs, which is one end of the continuum discussed by Shakespeare but that more often people view her impairments as a tragedy, which in both cases leads to misconceptions about her as a person based on prejudices.

In our society, prejudice is associated with the recognition of difference and an integral part of this is the concept of normality. There are various ways of using the word normal. In theory it could be a value-free word meaning merely that, which is common. To be different from normal would therefore not necessarily provoke prejudice. In practice, however, there are very strong values tied up with what our society considers to be normal and abnormal (Morris 1991, p.15).

The prejudices experienced by Morris created a situation where she was considered less valuable, an experience which is shared by the learners in this research and confirmed by their parents. The findings of this research revealed that the learners are, in their view and in the view of the parents, not seen as valuable and equal members of society. This suggests that their position is, at least partly, determined by prejudices and misconceptions.

The parents added that there is a focus on the learning difficulties of the learners in society. Impairments are not seen as differences but as problems, a view substantiated by Reid and Valle (2004).

Impairment too is, as Vygotsky noted more than 100 years ago, socially determined. A cognitive-physical difference is just a difference until we make it a problem (p.467).

Vehmas (2010) argues that there is a relationship between turning differences into problems and education. He observes that more people are seen as problematic in school organisations because their behaviour is perceived as challenging or they are considered to have a need for distinct ways of teaching them. In the Dutch context this has contributed to the categorisation of learners and a system where special education is organised as a variety of segregated types of special schools and categorisations.

It is noteworthy that the parents did not include special education as an issue in their views on the position of the learners in the transition from school to work and their position in society. The learners included special education, to an extent, as a factor which impeded their chances of employment as discussed in 6.4. Parents considered disability to be socially determined, hence their view that disability is mainly caused by society, but there is no evidence that they recognise that special education organised as segregated special schooling is a consequence of the ideas in society about learners with learning difficulties.

Evidently, these perceptions, which are part of the social identity of the learners, create potential obstacles for employment in the regular labour market. The views of employers confirmed the stigmatising effects of the social identity of the learners. The data suggested that the views of the employers were based on prejudices about the learners as a group. Employers were apprehensive about the expected dependence and need for support of the learners which was also mentioned by the parents. This led, for example, to the idea that accommodating the needs of these learners requires special training and skills.

*I do not have the time or the resources to train employees so that they can support young people with disabilities.*

The employers argued that they have to lower their standards when they employ learners with learning difficulties. They considered this to be unfair for their employees

without learning difficulties and also against the interest of the company. The lowering of standards is not a solution, which is supported by Vehmas (2010) who argues that such actions to accommodate people with disabilities is not an answer because it could lead to higher costs and jeopardize the interest of other groups in society. Vehmas proposes that it is vital to find a balance, which is in the interest of all groups. Lunt and Thornton (1994) also emphasise the importance of including all groups of people and propose policies of alleviation, which means reconsidering the whole concept of work.

Alleviating policies mean we must redesign, reframe, reconstruct and reconstitute inclusionary policies. Work needs to be redefined in terms of all persons and all abilities. Essentially, work and workplaces need to become 'user friendly' (p.227).

The findings from this research suggest that a redefinition of the concept of what counts as work is required to increase the chances of employment for learners with learning difficulties. The data from the interviews with the employers indicated that they value diversity among their employees. They mentioned that not all of their current employees have or need to have the same value for the company. Some employees with, for example, a lower productivity have additional values such as social skills, which are appreciated by the customers or by their colleagues and in this way contribute to the aims of the company. This suggests that they value the diversity of their employees but do not seem to apply the same concept of diversity to the learners with learning difficulties. This suggests a failure to understand the needs of young people with disabilities among employers (Taylor et al. 2004), who propose support for employers to overcome this lack of understanding. Winn and Hay (2009) argue that employers need to "reconceptualise the notion of disability" (p.103). When learners with learning difficulties are seen as part of the same human diversity as employees without learning difficulties their contribution to the workplace will probably also be valued.

Danforth (2008) refers to John Dewey when discussing the concept of equality related to disability and suggests that equality is determined by the opportunities people get to develop their capacities.

Equality occurs in the social balance of opportunity for individual learning and growth that is extended to all members: “One person is morally equal to others when he has the same opportunities for developing his capacities and playing his part that others have, although his capacities are quite unlike theirs” (Danforth 2008, p.54).

This view of equality is commensurate with a capability perspective on disability as proposed by Terzi (2010) since both Danforth and Terzi emphasise that taking human diversity as starting point is at the core of justice and equality in relation to disability. The research produced data which showed that the social identity of the learners in the Dutch context is not based on a perspective of disability as part of human diversity but seems to be based more on disability as a notion of defect (Vehmas 2010). This inevitably has implications for their education as will be discussed below.

#### *6.4. Impairments, disability and education*

##### *6.4.1. Education and human diversity.*

At the time of writing, regular secondary education in the Netherlands is not obliged to admit learners who are identified as learners with learning difficulties. There are some changes as a result of the developments from the introduction of Passend Onderwijs [Appropriate Education] (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2014) but these do not apply to secondary education yet.

A finding from the views of the learners was that they made a connection between their social identity and their education. In their view there are aspects of their educational arrangements which hinder their chances of employment. They specified that other

people treat them differently when they know that they attend a school for special education because they have negative perceptions of learners who attend special schools.

*It is not fair that people think you are stupid because you go to a special school.*

The learners were also critical about some of the content of their curriculum which, in their view, reflects low expectations of their abilities.

*We are learners of a secondary school but our curriculum looks like that of a primary school.*

The interpretation of their views is that the concept of special education does the opposite of what it is supposed to do. Instead of supporting the learners with integration into society, it consolidates negative perceptions of learners with learning difficulties. Vehmas (2010) substantiates this when he argues that special education is opposed to a view of disability as part of human diversity.

Special education is based on the examination of the assumed characteristics of certain groups of people, and on meeting the needs that are explained by these people's individual features. In other words, special education is about identifying categories of special (educational) need and relating special curricula to them (p.88).

As result of identifying these categories of needs there is a distinction between ordinary needs and special needs in which special needs are seen as deviant and problematic. The word special in itself implies "...different from what is usual" (Oxford English Dictionary 2008) and has no negative connotation, but when special is added to the concept of need it becomes related to deficit. Vehmas points out that special needs refer to abilities or activities that are considered important based on normative values

and not on empirical evidence. When learners do not sufficiently acquire these skills they are supposed to have a special need.

...the concept of 'special need' is actually euphemism for terms as 'deviant' and 'disabled'. It reflects the norms of school organisation and society as a whole regarding good and desirable ways of functioning and learning and, also, directs pupils on the basis of their needs to different educational and social careers (Vehmas 2010, p.92).

The negative connotations of the concept special needs also relate to what Terzi (2005a, 2005b) suggests about the influence of educational arrangements on whether impairments become disabilities or not. The learners, who participated in this research, are all educated in the Dutch segregated system. This means that they did not have opportunities to communicate and relate to other learners without learning difficulties. At the same time these other learners are also impeded in fully developing their capabilities to respect and tolerate individual differences. In this sense the segregated system deprives all learners to develop their full capabilities (Terzi 2005a). When the learners complete their education they enter a world in which they are largely unknown because their education was separated from that of others. Based on what is discussed above it appears that special educational arrangements in a segregated system might increase the likelihood that impairments become disabilities. This research suggests that the learners make a connection between factors that impede their chances of employment and special education. They experience that people associate negative connotations with learners from special schools and this influences the social identity of the learners.

#### *6.4.2. Impairments as capability deprivations.*

Thomas (1999) points out that impairments themselves cause limitations but as Crowther (2011) argues, when education addresses the "capability deprivations" (p.57)

it can prevent impairments becoming disabilities. This would suggest that education needs to shift its focus from addressing special educational needs, to equipping the learners with the capabilities they need to be able to become successful employees. The data indicated that the perception other people have of learners with learning difficulties causes “capability deprivations”. The learners made clear that they feel they are treated as children and that as a result of this they are not heard, their views and perspectives are not taken into consideration and they are not involved in decisions about their future because people think they are not able to make their own choices.

The data from the focus group interview with parents, supported the opinion of the learners that they are not sufficiently involved in decisions. All parents had the view that the learners are not able to make decisions about their future in this phase of their lives and were divided about whether the learners will be able to make these decisions in the future. The parents realised that their ideas might be caused by over-protectiveness. The interviews with teachers, however, revealed different opinions about how and to what extent the learners are involved in decisions about their future. In general the teachers think, and repeated several times in the interviews, that decisions about the future of the learners are made in collaboration between teachers, parents and learners. The findings of this research, however, indicate something different since collaboration would mean that decisions are made as joint activities with input from all those concerned but there is no evidence of any input from the learners. That learners are mentioned last by the teachers when they discuss decisions about their future can also be interpreted as an indication that their views do not have the same importance as views of teachers and parents. This contrasts with Pearman et al. (2004) who suggest that learners need to be put at the centre of their development in the transition from school to work and need to be involved in all decisions about their future. The findings indicate that parents do not have full confidence in the abilities of the learners to make their own decisions while the teachers seem to have doubts as



well. The school documents show that participation in decision making of the learners is not firmly established in the procedures of the school. Todd (2011) argues that while there seems to be an increase in the involvement of young people in decision-making in relation to their own education, this process is still very much “tokenistic”. There is some contradiction in the views of parents and teachers because both also indicate that they support the learners in their transition to employment. These differences assisted in understanding the position of the learners and the setting in which they expressed their views which was the main aim of the research.

The learners pointed out that they wanted to participate in and make the final decision about potential workplaces. They indicated that they sometimes needed support in making choices from parents and teachers but did not want decisions taken without them.

*Our parents can help us to make our own decisions but it is about our employment.*

*We know how the work-supervisor can support us.*

That learners do not participate in decisions about their future clearly puts them at a disadvantage. Involvement of the learners ensures that their choices are taken into consideration in the planning of the transition from school to work. It also gives schools the chance to identify barriers or difficulties which impede the process of successful transition to work. Wehmeyer et al. (2009) add that participation of the learners in the development of plans and decision making is part of self-determination of the learner and needs to be the core of any plan, as discussed in Chapter 2. The decisions learners referred to are choices about their work-experience placements but also about the employment or day-care facilities, which are considered suitable for them. When learners are not involved in decisions about their future it could mean they are directed to employment or day-care arrangements they would not have chosen for themselves

which would impede their right of self-determination. It could also lead to motivation problems, lack of involvement in the chosen employment, feelings of inferiority poor self-image and might even finally result in job-loss and unemployment (Morgan and Openshaw 2011).

#### *6.4.3. Addressing capability deprivations.*

In the interviews three of the six teachers showed awareness that they need to reflect on the position of the learners and the content of the meetings in which the transition from school to work is discussed. These teachers indicated that the abilities of the learners to stand up for themselves needs to be supported by teaching them how to participate in decisions about their future. They see it as necessary to start a dialogue with the learners in an earlier stage of their education. Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) also indicate that participation in decisions is a concept which needs to be taught. When learners are not adequately prepared this might result in disappointment and confirm prejudice that they lack abilities to make decisions about their future. The learners indicated that they sometimes have difficulties with expressing their views, which sometimes causes misunderstandings. When they explained their learning difficulties they included their communication skills, which they see as an impairment effect. They expect a professional attitude from their teachers to help them to overcome this potential barrier. Listening skills are part of broader abilities and can be considered necessary for teachers working in the transition phase to employment. Listening to learners, interpreting their views and processing these views into transition planning are essential parts of an approach which puts the learner at the centre of his/her education. This view is supported by Sax (2002), Buntinx and Bijwaard (2004), Fowler et al. (2007), Wehmeyer et al. (2009) and van Swet et al. (2011) who all propose approaches in which the influence of young people with disabilities on their own development is enhanced by strategies which promote self-determination. Such strategies provide "...a clear direction that is identified by the individual" (Sax 2002,

p.21), include listening skills of professionals working with the learners (Buntinx and Bijwaard 2004) and an attitude in which the learners are "...the primary agent for choices, decisions and actions..." (Wehmeyer et al. 2009, p.328) and set their own goals and determine their own destiny (van Swet 2011). Sax argues that it is important to establish which kind of communication is most appropriate for individual learners. This means that the use of additional communication techniques such as drawings, pictures or drawing mind maps also need to be considered and that teachers are familiar with these techniques.

Learners and teachers both specified that more and more diverse work-experience training would increase work related skills and that this would improve chances of employment for the learners. However, the relationships between work-experience training and chances of employment are more complicated than increasing work related skills alone. The findings of research by Fowler et al. (2007) and Crossover (2010) would suggest that autonomy, self-determination and independence are as important and need to be taught and trained. Teachers did not mention the development of autonomy, self-determination and independence of the learners as an important aspect of their education. This can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge about education in the transition phase from school to work. Morningstar and Clark (2009) point out that teachers working in transition education need specialist knowledge which goes beyond the basic skills of teachers working in secondary special education. This is in contrast with Norwich and Lewis (2007) who maintain that there is no distinctive difference in teaching learners with or without learning difficulties but their research had a focus on primary education. An important conclusion of Morningstar and Clark (2009), which relates to improving education, in the transition phase from school to work, is that teachers themselves need training to be able to work effectively in transition education. This applies to teachers working in the transition phase from school to work in this research. Wehmeyer et al. (2009) state that there is ample

evidence in research that learners need to learn skills, which enable them to adjust to their situation after school.

#### *6.5. Personal identity and a capability perspective on disability.*

McVittie et al. (2008) make the point that it does not come as a surprise that people do not identify with the label learning disabilities since this identity is based on categorisations in which a deficit against the norm defines the individual.

...individuals identified as having learning disabilities will deny or make no reference to the label. It has been suggested that this denial allows individuals to distance themselves from a highly stigmatising and powerful label which overrides alternative identities (McVittie et al. 2008, p.257).

Interpreting the views of the learners only as a denial of an undesirable label would depreciate their insights into their situation however. When the position of the learners is evaluated in relation to their “capabilities to function” (Terzi 2010, p.3), it becomes apparent that their social identity, as discussed in 6.3., inhibits their opportunities to make their own choices related to employment. The learners are seen as young people with learning disabilities and are treated in a way which relates to a view of disability as deviant. Their impairment becomes a disability when society makes it more difficult or sometimes impossible to participate in activities they value doing such as employment. The impairments themselves do not make it impossible to work. Shakespeare (2006) points out that disability needs to be understood in a holistic way as an interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Shakespeare 2006). From a capability perspective on disability (Terzi 2010), support and educational arrangements can be seen as a way of preventing that an impairment, in this case the learning difficulty, results in a disability.

The central concern of the capability approach is evaluating how well people's lives are going with reference to their 'capabilities to function' that is, their real opportunities to be and do what they value being and doing ( p.3).

This suggests that it is important to evaluate how education and support can contribute to capabilities which enhance the opportunities of employment for the learners. The findings of this research show that their education should focus on autonomy, self-determination, independence and involvement in decisions about their future because these are key-factors for successful transition from school to work as is also maintained by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE] (2002, 2009), Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003), Pearman et al. (2004), Ward et al. (2004), King et al. (2005), Fowler et al. (2007) and Crossover (2010, 2011).

When support is organised in an adequate way, which means that voices and views of learners are really taken into account, it can compensate for certain effects of the impairments. The learners have the capability to express their views and are able to make a case about how support needs to be organised. They pointed out that different people have different needs for support but they all agreed that support should have the aim to develop their independence. Another point which they consider important is that there should be one designated person who organises support, preferably their work-supervisor. Sometimes it can be sufficient when they know that there is somebody at their place of work who they can ask for support. In the view of the learners their work-supervisor has to be a person who treats them in accordance with their abilities and age which relates to the difference they make between personal and social identity.

What the learners suggest relates to a systematic approach of support which is also proposed by Pearman et al. (2004), Michaels and Ferrara (2005) and the Styrian Association for Education and Economics (2010). Michaels and Ferrara propose that

support is part of a common perspective which needs to be formulated as part of the transition plans of the learners. Wehmeyer et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of learner involvement when establishing these plans and question whether adjustment skills alone are enough to ensure that learners can cope in post school settings. In the view of Wehmeyer et al. they need to learn;

...to advocate for their own needs and interests by taking action to change circumstances that pose obstacles to their pursuits (p.326).

It is in the interest of the learners that they are able to advocate their personal needs for support and change situations in which support is given by too many different people without consulting them. For the learners support is not a fixed state. It has an aim to enhance their independence and could be minimised or even become unnecessary when they have developed the acquired abilities. In this sense they see support as part of a learning sequence in which they take responsibility for their own development.

## *6.6. Conclusions.*

The process of data collection and analysis provided themes which were related to the research questions, as discussed in Chapter 5. Analysis of the themes led to the identification of different issues with as central issue the differences in perception of disability.

The view of the learners is that their learning difficulties are part of human diversity which relates to a capability perspective on disability as reflected upon by Sen (1999), Terzi (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2010) and Reindal (2008, 2009, 2010) also discussed in Chapter 2. The central finding of this research is that the position of the learners in the transition phase from school to work is determined by the differences in the understanding of disability between themselves and the group they call other people. The learners argue that other people have a different view of their learning difficulties

and do not make a distinction between learning difficulties and learning disabilities. This difference has consequences for the position of the learners and is interpreted as a difference between the personal and social identity of the learners as discussed in 6.2 and 6.3. The personal identity of the learners is one of multiple identities learners can have as discussed in 2.5.1. This research has a focus on their identity in connection with employment in which they see themselves as young people with learning difficulties who value employment. They realise that they need support to achieve their aim to become employed and do not deny their impairments. In their view their learning difficulties are part of human diversity. Their learning difficulties become learning disabilities when they impede their chances of employment. This takes place when other people do not see their learning difficulties as part of human diversity but as deviant from the norm in society. These variations in perception or understanding of disability determine the position of the learners in the transition from school to work since they define whether they are seen as valuable employees or not (Gil 2008).

Analysis of the focus group interview with parents showed that they also notice the difference in how the learners perceive their learning difficulties and the perception other people have of learning difficulties. However, the parents do not share the views of the learners that they are not sufficiently involved in decisions about their future and do not make the connection between special schools and the stigmatising effects of this type of education. The interviews with employers provided data which contributed to an insight into the social identity of the learners. The analysis of the data from the interviews with teachers added themes which relate to the education of the learners, discussed in 6.4. The analysis of the school documents provided limited information since the documents mainly described procedures. However, the procedures which were described in the documents provided some insight into the practice of the school. Interrogation of the documents gave the impression of a practice in which the views of the learners are considered to be of minor importance. This confirms some of the

critique of the learners who stated that they are not sufficiently involved in decisions about their future.

While the learners are young people with a diversity of identities (Wenger 1998, McVittie et al. 2008, Vloet 2015), this research has a focus on their personal identity related to employment. The social identity, which the learners experience as imposed upon them by others, is based on a view of disability as deviant from the norm in which the learners are not seen as equal and valuable members of society. The learners are educated in a system which categorises disabilities and organises education in segregated special schools. The fact that the learners attend a special school, enhances negative perceptions of their abilities while the content of their education impedes their chances of employment, to an extent, since it does not address key-factors for successful employment of learners with learning difficulties.

A key finding related to the process of data collection from the learners is that it is important to create a situation in which the learners feel free to express themselves and have the possibility to support each other in formulating their views. This is necessary to support the learners in giving their views so that they do not give opinions they think the researcher wants to hear. The learners needed time and support from each other to formulate and reformulate their views. The focus group interviews provided a situation in which the learners supported each other in expressing their views on their position in the transition from school to work. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 which will present some conclusions relating to this research.



## *Chapter 7.*

### *Conclusions and Recommendations.*

#### *7.1. Introduction.*

Using the analysed data to address the main research question concerning the views of the learners, it became apparent that they are fully capable to express their opinions and have clear and nuanced views on the transition from school to work. These views are worth listening to and need to be addressed as a matter of justice (Lewis 2011) and also because they provide important information about transition from school to work. Lansdown (2001), Shier (2001) and Lewis (2011) point out that according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child every child has the right to express their views and be heard in all matters concerning them. The findings of this research suggest that it is not only a matter of rights, that the voice of learners is heard, but that it also provides valuable information which can assist to reflect on their education and ways forward to enhance their chances of employment. According to the learners who participated in this research, there is a fundamental difference between their views on disability and the views of other people. This difference determines their position in the transition from school to work in a negative way as it has the potential to hinder their chances of employment. The learners view themselves capable to participate in decisions. The findings of this research suggest that under the right circumstances they are very able to make their own case and have a balanced view of their needs and capabilities. Their views can be considered an important contribution to the body of knowledge about listening to learners with learning difficulties. The findings also point out the importance of taking their views into consideration in the transition from school to work, as will be discussed further in section 7.3.

The intention of this research was to critically investigate the views of a group of learners with learning difficulties on their position in the transition from school to work. Wehmeyer et al. (2009), Kamps et al. (2010), the Styrian Association for Education and Economics [SAEE] (2010) and Crossover (2010), make the case that participation of learners with learning difficulties in decisions about their future is essential for successful transition from school to work. Nevertheless, research into the views of learners with learning difficulties on this transition process is still hard to find. This is also maintained by Lewis (2011), who points out that listening to the voice of learners with disabilities lags behind.

Progress in consulting with disabled children has lagged behind that of formally seeking children's views more generally (p.89).

Lewis also indicates that there is an increase in parental rights and involvement in their children's education while at the same time the views of parents and their children often differ. The findings of this research suggest that the views of the learners not only differ from their parents in some aspects but also from views of teachers and employers.

As discussed in Chapter 1, education in the Netherlands is changing. Appropriate Education is implemented and the act on the Quality of (Secondary) Special Education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands 2010) has the aim to enhance the participation of learners with disabilities into employment. It is intended that the findings from this research can contribute to a better understanding of the position of learners with learning difficulties in the transition from school to work. Taking note of the views of the learners who participated in this research might help schools to reflect on their own education and organise their education in such a way that it will increase the chances of employment for learners with learning difficulties.

### *7.2. Limitations of this research.*

A limitation of this research is that it investigated the views of a specific group of learners, namely 19 learners who are in the transition phase from school to work. This means that views of other learners who are in the transition from school to different forms of day-care have not been included. These learners might have comparable views and some of them might value employment as an outcome of their education. However, the way their education is organised leads them into day-care. Since it is not possible to change that process for them anymore, it seemed unfair to include these learners in the research because it could lead to expectations which could not be fulfilled.

As discussed in 3.2. this research has characteristics of the interpretive and the critical theory and critical education research (Cohen et al. 2000). It can be considered interpretive in the sense that it provides an interpretation and understanding of the social reality of the transition from school to work as it is constructed by the participants. Giving learners a voice, as part of this understanding, is an aspect of critical theory and critical educational research since the aim is that this voice should contribute to a discussion about the improvement of practice and possibly empowerment of the learners. The findings of the research provide material which can be used to develop practice which takes the views of learners as a starting point. Dissemination of their voice, through the findings of the research, might lead to practices which will empower them in the transition from school to work but it is important to be aware that it only provides a basis for such developments.

### *7.3. Conclusions.*

The complexity of listening to views and voice of learners, the importance of participation in transition planning and decision-making and the key-factors of transition planning and transition education have been thoroughly researched and discussed in

literature. This research adds the views of the learners on their position in transition from school to employment.

The interpretation of this view is that the learners indicate that their position is determined by a fundamental difference between their personal view of disability and the views other people have of learning difficulties and learning disabilities. As discussed in 2.5. it can be argued that the learners have multiple identities but the focus of this research has been on their identity in connection with employment. A key-finding of the research is that the learners rejected a description of themselves as disabled. Watson (2002) argues that this can sometimes be the result of denial of impairments but that does not conform to the views of the learners in this research. The learners do not consider themselves disabled but see themselves as young people with learning difficulties which indicates that they recognise their impairment. They consider learning difficulties to be part of their identity related to the transition from school to work. In their view learning difficulties are part of human diversity and in this sense they experience a discrepancy with more general views in Dutch society in which this diversity is seen as deviance from the norm. The learners argue that there is a difference between their personal identity which they have chosen themselves and their social identity which has stigmatising effects and is imposed upon them by others. Giddens (1991) argues that people are able to choose their own identity and ignore identities which are a result of the perceptions of others. The learners in this research do not ignore their social identity but they reject it. They argue that their learning difficulties are turned into learning disabilities by other people. The main argument is that their social identity reflects an underestimation of their abilities.

The learners view themselves as being more capable than the other participants in the research think they are. The analysed data inform that the learners often experienced that people did not really listen to them, that their views were not taken into consideration and their capabilities undervalued. The findings of this research suggest

that the social identity of the learners is largely understood from an individual medical perspective in which the learners belong to a specific category. The parents substantiated that other people have negative perceptions of the abilities of the learners while the data from the interviews with the employers confirmed this. Employers are reluctant to employ young people with learning difficulties due to negative perceptions about their abilities and presumed need for specialised support. The transition process could therefore be seen to disadvantage them because their differences are seen as deficits and disabilities.

The learners also argued that final decisions are taken by their parents and teachers which also suggests an underestimation of their abilities. Winter (2006) argues that when people are in a situation where they feel that they have little control over their lives it is very likely that they also develop the feeling that people do not listen to them. The data from the interviews with parents, teachers and employers and analysis of school documents substantiate the experiences of the learners. Parents and teachers have doubts about the abilities of the learners to make their own decisions. Employers have low expectations about their abilities, while the analysis of documents indicates that there are no policies which specify that it is a requirement to listen to the learners or to support them in expressing their views. The points above suggest that there is no “listening culture” (Lewis 2011). It cannot be denied that listening to the views of learners with learning difficulties is complex but it is essential to find ways in which they can express their views and include these views in the planning of their transition since their participation is a determining factor for success.

An important conclusion related to the process of listening to the voice of the learners is that the circumstances, in which learners are invited to express their views, need careful consideration. The learners in this research gained confidence to express their views in a situation where they could support each other. The focus group interviews provided such a situation. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) emphasise the importance of

a strategic approach in which the views of learners are listened to in a broad, explicit and deliberate way. Listening to the voice of learners with learning difficulties can be complicated (Lewis 2011) which was confirmed by the initial individual interviews where the learners gave answers which they thought were expected from them. Cohen et al. (2000) identify this result as a possible consequence of the unequal power relations and indicate that it contributes to the complexity of interviewing learners with learning difficulties. This research showed that carefully structured and managed focus group interviews have the potential to solve this problem. The interaction between the learners in the focus group interviews created a situation where the learners explored each other's opinions and were able to formulate collective views on the issues which were discussed with little interference from the researcher. This last point is particularly important because in focus groups in which the researcher has a prominent role, data might represent more of his/her opinions than those of the participants (Llewellyn 2009). The focus group discussions showed that the participating learners had the ability to reflect on their own views, on the views of others, that they were able to explore an issue and make meaningful contributions. This finding relates to the research process but it can be argued that there are possibly also implications for listening to the views of learners in general.

A finding of this research is that the learners have a much more sophisticated perspective about their needs in the transition process than the others involved in this process think they have. The process of transition is in their opinion led by their teachers and parents who do not necessarily view them as having the capabilities they believe they have. The issues about listening to the views and voice of the learners as discussed above indicate that there is influence of the social identity of the learners within their education. Unlike their parents, the learners made a connection between negative perceptions of their abilities and segregated special schooling. The learners argued that the fact that they attended a school for special education enhanced

negative perceptions of their abilities among employers and other people. They were also critical about their education and maintained that it does not equip them with the capabilities they need, to improve their chances of employment. That their parents did not make these connections is an important finding. It shows that learners and parents do not have the same views while in general it is the parents' views people listen to, as research by Goupil et al. (2002) and Ward et al. (2003) shows. In a situation where listening to learners is not part of the practice of an institution it is very unlikely that their views form the basis for transition planning. It can be argued that this lack of involvement of the learners can potentially impede their chances of employment.

There is more evidence in the findings of this research which suggests that their education does not enhance the chances of the learners of employment. Literature about transition planning and processes indicates that autonomy, self-determination and independence are determining factors for successful transition and need to be part of transition education (Wehmeyer and Palmer 2003, Wehmeyer et al. 2009, Crossover 2011). This should have consequences for the transition process from school to work of the learners. As discussed in section 2.5. a key-factor for successful transition is the participation of the learners in transition planning (Sax 2002, Buntinx and Bijwaard 2004, Webb et al. 2014). Participation can be seen as a continuum in which listening to the views and voice of learners, influence on decision-making and making final decisions are interrelated (Franklin and Sloper 2009). Participation also requires autonomy, self-determination and independence of the learners. Parents, teachers and also employers need to be involved in their transition process and support learners in making their own decisions.

The findings of this research suggest that the aims of learners, parents and teachers are not that different. The learners desire employment. Parents want to support the learners in their transition to employment. Teachers indicate that they see the learners as potential employees. More involvement of employers in transition planning can

possibly assist to show the capabilities of the learners and show that they can be valuable employees (Gil 2008). The differences are found in the views about how to realise the aims of the learners. The findings of this research suggest that it is important that all participants develop a shared understanding of the aims of the learners and the meaning of participation in the process of achieving their aims. This will enhance the self-determination of the learners, which makes them better prepared to have control over their own future. When there is no clear understanding about the implications and importance of participation this can possibly lead to confusion (Franklin and Sloper 2009). Participation of the learners in decisions about their future needs to be embedded in the culture and practice of the school and supported by the whole organisation. This is substantiated by Sinclair (2004) who points out that participation can only become meaningful when it is not confined to isolated moments. Participation needs to be seen as a process which involves an entire organisation (Kirby et al. 2003) Participation in transition planning requires more trust in the competences of the learners and a focus on capabilities of the learners.

The findings of this research show that learners are often described in terms of individual deficits, incapacity and special needs as a result of the individual psycho-medical model (Reindal 2010). This influences the perceptions of other people and makes it more likely that they have lower expectations of the competences of the learners. This is also pointed out by Jingree and Finlay (2013) and also relates back to listening to the learners as discussed earlier in this section.

Terzi (2005b) argues that practices which are based on individual deficits and focus on difference as a characteristic of abnormality have negative effects for young people with disabilities. These effects were pointed out extensively by the learners. Their views relate to a capability perspective of disability in which learning difficulties are seen as a part of human diversity which,



...sees disability as one aspect of the complexity of human heterogeneities, and therefore as one aspect of the complexity of individuals in their interaction with their physical, economic, social and cultural environment (Terzi 2010, p.91).

In the transition from school to work, the learning difficulties are not the most important factors which impede the chances of employment of the learners. Their chances are impeded by the perceptions of others. The views of the learners and the findings of this research can assist schools to evaluate their education from a capability perspective of disability and in this way improve the position of the learners in the transition from school to work and support them to achieve what they value doing. The learners pointed out some important aspects of their education which impede their chances of employment. The capability approach can assist schools to evaluate how their education contributes to developing capabilities of the learners which contribute to “effective and equal participation in society” (Terzi 2010, p.153).

Shakespeare (2006), Reindal (2008, 2010), Terzi (2005a, 2005b, 2010) and Watson (2002, 2012) share the view that impairments and disability are part of human diversity and need to be addressed accordingly. The findings of this research show that this idea is underpinned by a group of learners with learning difficulties who were very capable of making their own case and to present ways forward.

#### *7.4. Recommendations.*

On a general policy level the findings of this research suggest that it would be commendable to abolish the whole system of special education as it is organised in the Netherlands and develop an inclusive system based on a capability perspective of disability as discussed by Terzi (2005a, 2010). When disability and special needs are seen as “the result of the interlocking of individual and circumstantial features” (p.181) it establishes an holistic understanding of disability (Shakespeare 2006) which can make the categorisation of learners into those who need to go to special schools and

those who can attend regular education redundant. This would potentially solve the problem of the stigmatising effects of the fact that learners with learning difficulties attend special schools. The available resources which are in place in the current system could be redistributed based on capabilities and activities which are valued by the learners. Schools could then develop a system in which learners are taught and supported to participate in decisions about their future from an early stage in education.

A system change as proposed above is not to be expected in the near future given the fact that Dutch education is currently in the process of implementing *Passend Onderwijs* [Appropriate Education] and new legislation concerning the quality of (Secondary) Special Education as discussed in 2.2. Appropriate education is an attempt to integrate more children with special needs into an existing school system that stays unchanged. Farrell (2001) and Lloyd (2010) argue that without a redefinition of the system such attempts are not in the benefit of the learners. The quality act does not propose a system change either. Special education will still be based on categorisations of learning disabilities and although some categories might be defined differently, the sharp division between regular and special education remains.

It is possible however that even without such major changes, as proposed at the beginning of this section, taking place, schools could still adopt an approach which redefines the role of the learners. As suggested by Wehmeyer et al. (2009) teachers need to be trained in transition planning, which includes listening skills and the development of transition plans which take the views of the learners as a starting point. A method like Person-centred planning (PCP) as proposed by Sax (2002), and discussed earlier in 6.4.2, could offer a framework for the development of such a system.

Person-centred planning requires equal participation, positive and clear communication, and active involvement of the focus individual (p.15).

Person-centred planning is a long-term approach, which can be used for the transition from school to employment or other activities which are valued by the learners from the start of secondary education. In this way all parties involved, learners, parents, teachers and employers can grow into the process and learners can be taught to participate in decisions. The findings of this research suggest that group discussions have the potential to elicit valuable input of the learners since learners have the possibility to support each other in formulating and exploring their views. It would also be commendable to involve employers early in the process. More involvement of employers could reinforce their understanding of the capabilities of learners with learning difficulties as also pointed out by Kamps et al. (2010). An approach like PCP can reinforce the opportunities of the learners to participate in an equal and effective way, which is the aim of the capability approach to disability (Terzi 2010). When their capabilities to function and the aims of the learners are taken as starting point, this will enhance their opportunities to choose a life they value. This does not mean, however, that learners make all decisions by themselves. PCP entails equal participation in which the input of other parties such as parents, teachers and employers is also valued and decisions are taken in cooperation. Careful consideration is required to account for the autonomy, self-determination and independence of the learner in this process. The findings of the focus group discussions suggest that forms of peer support might have the potential to address this issue.

#### *7.5. Implications for further research.*

This research made a start with investigating the views of learners with learning difficulties in the transition from school to work. The way they reflected on their own situation shows that learners with learning difficulties have the potential to express clear views about their future. The learners who participated in this research showed an ability to reflect on their own situation in a way which related to a capability perspective on disability (Terzi 2010). The research was carried out with the

participation of a specific group of learners. The learners were already selected for the transition phase from school to work earlier in their education process. It might be interesting to carry out comparable research into the views of all learners in the school. This would require the use of different research techniques because some learners in the school have more profound learning difficulties and are less able to communicate through the use of spoken language. Additional communication techniques have been used in research and proved that it is possible to include also learners with profound communication difficulties in discussions about their future. Sax (2002) for example proposes the use of language in combination with drawings or pictures while Cameron and Murphy (2002) used 'Talking Mats' a special tool to allow learners with learning and communication difficulties to be included in discussions and decisions in their transition to adulthood.

Another implication for further research is the finding in this research which suggests that there is a difference between the views of the learners in the segregated system of special schooling in the Netherlands and the views of the parents. The learners indicated that the fact that they were attending a special school impeded their chances of employment. They experienced stigmatising effects but were also critical about the content of their education. Parents recognised some of the stigmatising effects and indicated that education could be improved but did not question the role of the segregated education system in the Netherlands. It would be interesting to investigate and explore these differences.

This research investigated the views of a small number of employers who had little or no experience with learners with learning difficulties. Research into the differences between the views of employers with and employers without experience with learners with learning difficulties could provide interesting data about this issue. This might possibly assist to support employers in creating more employment for young people with learning difficulties.

### *7.6. Concluding Comment.*

At the beginning of this research it was explained to the learners what the research was about. They thought it was funny that their views were investigated and that this would result in a book, which was their understanding of writing this thesis. When they understood what it was about they became very serious and their discussions were essential in understanding their position. In this sense the learners made an invaluable contribution to this research.

They deserve that more people make the effort to listen to the very important things they have to say.

## *Appendices.*

### *Appendix 1. Process of the allocation of statements.*

#### Process of Allocation of Statements in the Netherlands

Schools for Secondary Special Education in the Netherlands are developing different educational routes related to the expected levels of development of their learners. The nineteen participating learners in this research attend an educational route leading to a statement labour or a statement work focused day-care. The statement itself will be assigned by an independent committee the Commissie Indicatiestelling Zorg (CIZ) [Committee for Social Service Statements] based on the available information and sometimes after an assessment of the learner. In the statement labour the CIZ will determine the wage value of the individual learner. This is the part of the salary which needs to be paid by the employer. The salary will be supplemented with social security benefits to the legally determined minimum wages. The statement will also regulate the amount of support the learner is entitled to. Although sheltered workshops still exist they are phased out by the government and are not a feasible option for employment anymore.

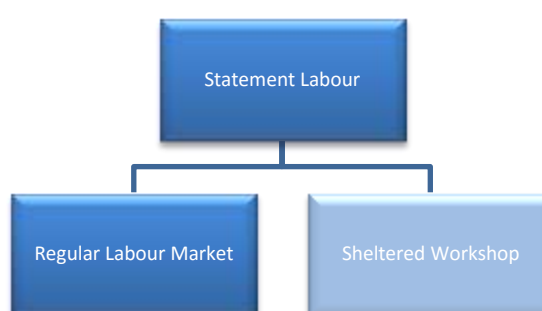




Figure A.1. Diagram of possible statements for learners with learning difficulties schools when they leave school.

The day-care statement has three sub statements:

1. Work focused day-care for learners who are able to work in regular companies without being employed or are able to work in work focused day centres. These learners can deal with a certain workload and are able to work with regular but not constant supervision.
2. Activity focused day-care for learners who can participate in activities that are sometimes connected with labour but there is no workload and constant supervision.
3. Experiences and care focused day-care which means that learners need constant care. These day-care centres have a focus on individual needs and activities.

## Appendix 2. Ethical Grid Stutchbury and Fox (2009).

Questions to consider

### External/ecological

#### Cultural sensitivity

1 What are the values, norms and roles in the environment in which I am working and are they likely to be challenged by this research?

#### Awareness of all parts of the institution

2 What is the relationship between the group/individual I am working with and the institution as a whole?

How does it affect the participant(s)?

#### Responsive communication – awareness of the wishes of others

3 How might my work be viewed/interpreted by others in the institution? How will the language I use be interpreted?

#### Responsibilities to sponsors

4 What are my responsibilities to the people paying for or supporting this research (local authority, my school, external bodies)?

#### Codes of practice

5 Have I worked within the British Educational Research Association guidelines? Are there other relevant codes which might also be applicable? Am I aware of my rights and responsibilities through to publication?

#### Efficiency/ use of resources

6 Have I made efficient use of the resources available to me, including people's time?

#### Quality of evidence on which conclusions are based

7 Have I got enough evidence to back-up my conclusions and recommendations?

#### The law

8 What legal requirements relating to working with children do I need to comply with? Am I aware of my data protection responsibilities? Am I aware of the need for disclosure of criminal activity? Do I need written permissions?

#### Risk

9 Are there any risks to anyone as a result of this research?

### Consequential/utilitarian

#### Benefits for individuals

10 What are the benefits of my doing this research to the participants? Would an alternative methodology bring greater individual benefits?

#### Benefits for particular groups/ organisation

11 What are the benefits of my doing my research to the school/department? Could these be increased in any way? How will I ensure that they know about my findings? Is my work relevant to the school development plan? Can I justify my choice of methods to my sponsors?

#### Most benefits for society

12 Is this a worthwhile area to research? Am I contributing to the "greater good"? Is it high quality and open to scrutiny?

#### Avoidance of harm

13 Are there any sensitive issues likely to be discussed or aspects of the study likely to cause discomfort or stress?

#### Benefits for the researcher

14 Am I going to be able to get enough data to write a good thesis or paper? Am I aware of my publication rights? What might I learn from this project? Will it help in my long-term life goals?

### Deontological



Avoidance of wrong – honesty and candour

15 Have I been open and honest in advance with everyone who might be affected by this research? Are they aware that they can withdraw, in full or in part, if they wish?

Fairness

16 Have I treated all participants fairly? Am I using incentives fairly? Will I acknowledge everyone involved fairly? Can I treat all participants equally?

Reciprocity

17 Have I explained all the implications and expectations to the participants? Have I negotiated mutually beneficial arrangements? Have I made myself available when those involved might wish me to be? Are the participants clear about roles, including my own, as they relate to expectations?

Tell the truth

18 If there is any need for covert research how will I deal with this? What will I do if I find out something that the participants/school/department do not like? How will I report unpopular findings?

Keep promises

19 Have I clarified access to the raw data and how I will share findings including at publication? How will I ensure confidentiality?

Do the most positive good

20 Is there any other way I could carry out this research that would bring more benefits to those involved?

**Relational/individual**

Genuine collaboration/trust established

21 Who are the key people involved? How can I build a constructive relationship with them?

Avoid imposition/respect autonomy

22 Am I making unreasonable or sensitive demands on any individuals? Do they appreciate that participation is voluntary?

Confirmation of findings

23 What steps will I take in my methodology to ensure the validity and reliability of my findings? Can I involve participants in validation? Will I report in an accessible way to those involved?

Respect persons equally

24 How will I demonstrate my respect for all participants? Have I treated pupils in the same way as teachers.

Figure A. 2. Ethical Grid Stutchbury and Fox (2009 pp.495-496).

### Appendix 3. Example of the process of meaning condensation.

The following example is a translation of the process of meaning condensation which took place as part of this research. The process in the research was carried out in Dutch with translations afterwards. The example shows an extract from the focus group interview with parents.

Natural unit	Possible central themes	Notes	Central theme
<p>P1. We think they have a problem. P2. I <u>recognise</u> this. X, my son came home from football training, he told in shock that one of the trainers of the team had <u>said that he was disabled</u> and that, for this reason, the other team members needed to <u>treat him in a different way</u>, this astonished him. P1. <u>treat him in a different way</u> because he was <u>disabled</u> my son too. P3. Yes, yes. P1. They <u>treat them different</u>. Yes. P5 <i>They have a problem with learning.</i></p>	<p>Recognition.</p> <p>Other people consider them disabled.</p> <p>Treat them in a different way.</p>	<p>We refers to society. We as members of society.</p> <p><i>To next unit.</i></p>	<p><i>Other people treat the learners differently because they consider them disabled.</i></p>
<p>P2. He <u>knows</u> he has a <u>problem with learning</u>. They do not</p>	<p>Learners recognise their learning difficulty.</p>		<p><i>Parents indicate that the learners do not deny their learning</i></p>

<p>say they do not. But that <u>other people say you are disabled...</u> he was really astonished</p> <p>P5. Yes sometimes.. sometimes <u>they do not immediately understand what people mean. That is their learning difficulty.</u> They know.</p> <p><i>P4. Yes but not disabled. P5. No</i></p>	<p>Understanding learning difficulty.</p> <p>Learning difficulty is not the same as learning disability.</p>	<p>P5. Difficult to hear. Interrupted by P2? P3?</p> <p><i>To next unit</i></p>	<p><i>difficulties.</i></p>
<p>P3. No. It is not the same. I think <u>society</u>.</p> <p>P4. Yes <u>society other people</u>. They <u>do not see learning difficulties as part of differences</u>. P2. The <u>separation becomes more visible</u>. In the past they were more accepted. Like in other cultures; <u>That person has a foot problem or an ugly nose and the third one has a problem with expressing himself. All different people</u>. But not now not in this society.</p>	<p>Society does not recognise learning difficulties as part of differences between people.</p> <p>Change in society? Cultures?</p> <p>Differences between people.</p>	<p>Not relevant it is not about the change or other cultures but about the differences.</p> <p>Differences=part of diversity.</p>	<p><i>Other people do not see learning difficulties as part of human diversity.</i></p>

Figure A. 3. Process of meaning condensation.

#### *Appendix 4. Example of written explanation for the learners.*

Beste leerling,

Bedankt dat je mee wilt doen aan dit onderzoek. Doel van het onderzoek heb ik uitgelegd. Door mee te doen geef je toestemming dat ik alles wat je in de interviews zegt mag gebruiken voor mijn onderzoek.

Er zijn een paar belangrijke afspraken:

- De interviews worden opgenomen.
- Je mag altijd zeggen dat je een vraag niet wilt beantwoorden.
- Je mag ook altijd zeggen dat je niet meer mee wilt doen. Dat hoeft je niet uit te leggen.
- Je mag ook tegen je leerkracht zeggen dat je niet mee wilt doen. Zij zegt het dan tegen mij. Leerkracht weet hiervan.
- Alles wat je zegt wordt met vertrouwen behandeld. Dat betekent dat niemand buiten de leerlingen in de interview groep en ik zullen horen wat je hebt gezegd en ik praat daar niet over met anderen.
- Jullie mening is heel belangrijk en die wil ik natuurlijk wel gebruiken voor mijn onderzoek. Wat ik opschrijf over wat jullie zeggen blijft anoniem. Dat betekent dat er geen namen in mijn verslag staan.
- Mocht er in de gesprekken iets heel belangrijks naar voren komen waarvan ik vind dat ik dat wel moet gaan bespreken (bv als je op je stage heel slecht behandeld zou zijn) dan praten we daarover buiten mijn onderzoek. Ik doe dat nooit zonder dat je dat weet.
- Als mijn onderzoek klaar is en goedgekeurd door de universiteit worden jullie allemaal uitgenodigd voor een uitleg over de resultaten ook als je dan niet meer op deze school zit.

Chr. Pols.



Translation:

Dear Learner,

Thank you for participating in this research. The aim of the research has been explained. With your participation in this research you agree that the things which will be said in the focus group interviews can be used for my research.

There are some important points which apply to the focus group interviews.

- You can always refuse to answer a question.
- You can always indicate that you do not want to participate anymore. You do not have to explain why.
- You can also tell your teacher that you do not want to participate anymore. She will tell me. The teachers know about this.
- Everything you say in the interviews will be used confidentially. This means that nobody besides the learners in the focus group and myself will hear what you say in the focus group interview and I will not talk about it with others.
- Your views are very important so I will use them for my research. They will be used anonymised. This means that I do not use names in my report.
- If something comes up in the interviews, which I think needs to be discussed with other people immediately (e.g. one of you tells me that a learner is treated inappropriately at the work-experience place) we will discuss this separately. I will not do that without your knowledge.
- When I have completed my research and it is approved by the University, you will all be invited for a presentation of the research including the learners who will have left this school by then.

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